Why does my horse have an itchy butt?!

Horses rub their tail and butt for a variety of reasons. We have classically thought that all this rubbing was due to worms...more specifically, pinworms. The female pinworm crawls out the horse’s anus to lay her eggs on or around the anus—hence the rubbing and itching. The eggs are only visible under a microscope. You can use clear tape adhered to the perianal area to take a sample to your veterinarian to confirm the presence of the eggs.

While these pinworms cause the tail hairs to get broken and roughed up, these worms are not the cause of significant health problems associated with other internal parasites in horses. Deworming your horse may cause a temporary elimination of symptoms but the dewormer does not affect the eggs on the skin around the anus. When these eggs hatch the life cycle begins again. Owners must wash the area around the anus at the same time as deworming to control the pinworms.

Consider these *other* causes of rubbing:

1. It is spring and the horse is shedding out its winter coat. Notice that the area around the tail is one of the first areas to shed on the horse....all that extra hair makes the horse rub this area.

2. The horse may have a primary skin disease on the tail. Closely inspect the tail on the top and underside for any signs of skin disease such as flakes, lice, erosions or weeping or dry lesions. Horses can develop an insect sensitivity or food, blanket or bedding allergies that can cause them to rub their tail.

3. Stallions and geldings with a dirty sheath may rub their back ends.

4. Ditto for mares with accumulated dirt and dead skin in their udder region.

Careful inspection of the top and underside of the tail along with an assessment for pinworms can help owners determine a course of treatment. Horses with an allergic skin disease will not respond to deworming. Define the cause of the rubbing before you begin treatment.