

Daniel P. Keenan, DVM
Ron McAlister, DVM
Lynsey D. Makkreel, DVM



AURAL PLAQUE

What is Aural Plaque?



Aural plaques are white flakey patches that appear on the inside of one or both of your horses ears. It is initiated by chronic fly irritation that makes the sensitive skin inside the ear become inflamed. As a defense mechanism, the skin grows thicker and harder (hyperkeratosis). As the condition progresses, the skin underneath the plaques lose the normal pigment and turns pink. There may be small (BB sized) hard growths that develop within the plaques. The plaques often cause the ears to be sensitive due to inflammation and itching, and this can make bridling and handling difficult.

The insects that start the process are usually small gnats, and can often be seen feeding on the inside of the ear. Their bites will cause blood and serum to leak from the skin, and the first signs seen may be a crumbly crust forming on the inside of the ears. Aural plaque is sometimes called "ear fungus", but there is no fungal components. Antifungal and antibiotics have no effect on the disease.

How is Aural Plaque diagnosed?

Aural plaque is diagnosed by the clinical signs. Other growths can occur in the ear, particularly sarcoids and melanomas (two types of tumors seen in horses) and these must be considered in the examination. They are much more serious conditions than aural plaque.

What is the treatment for aural plaque?

Once the plaques are formed, an oil based ointment containing steroids will clean away the plaque and sooth the irritated skin. If there is pigment loss, it is permanent and the inside of the ear will always be pink. There has been some recent research that indicates that a virus similar to the one that causes warts is involved and antiviral ointments may be helpful, although more study is necessary.

Individual sensitivities to insects certainly make some horses more prone to aural plaque than others, but the situation is worse in those horses that have their natural defense against flies (their ear hair) removed. Repeated clipping not only exposes the tender skin inside the ears to insects, but the act of clipping can be irritating and contribute to the problem. If you need to keep the ears trimmed for showing, you should use a fly mask with ear covers or fly repellent salve (which lasts much longer than liquids) to protect the clipped areas. If you are just interested in a tidier look, try just trimming the hair shorter rather than clipping it all away. It will give you a cleaner look, but leave a bit of protection against the flies.