The most common horse sicknesses in winter:

WHAT'S TO BLAME FOR WINTER SKIN PROBLEMS?

The answer is simple: the weather where our wet winters increase moisture levels in the environment. 'This creates conditions that break down the protective oily layer on a horse's skin, allowing bacteria to thrive, The thicker rugs we use in winter can also lead to sweating, again increasing dampness and moisture. And horses that share rugs are particularly prone to skin infections, as rugs can easily transfer bacteria.

WHAT MAKES HORSES SO PRONE TO SKIN CONDITIONS?

Your horse's skin is the largest organ in his body. It's his first defence against moisture, abrasive substances such as dirt and grit, parasites and bacteria, so problems are common. Keep in mind that, depending on the skin condition, it can be very painful for your horse, and, as a condition worsens, it can lead to a secondary infection which causes additional stress for your horse. However, the right treatment can turn things around quickly.
Here's how you can tell the difference between the most common skin conditions. First note that preventing your horse from developing them in the first place is the best route:

RAIN SCALD AND MUD FEVER
These are both bacterial infections,but rain scald affects a horse's back, the sides of his chest and hindquarters, whereas mud fever affects the legs.'
Rain scald will appear as scabs, often with tufts of hair attached to them and sore-looking pink skin in between. The scabs may vary in size and are not usually itchy. Resist the temptation to pick at the scabs.They may be unsightly, but removing them can be painful for your horse and cause the area to bleed. It might also make your horse reluctant to let you near those areas again!
Similarly, mud fever will show up as scabs on the legs, and could cause lameness if the scabs form around the heels and coronet band. In severe cases, mud fever can lead to a deeper skin infection and may cause swelling in the leg.

LICE AND MANGE
Parasites such as lice and mange commonly affect breeds with longer hair. Horses with Cushing's disease (a condition where too much of the hormone cortisol is produced, leading to a weakened immune system) are also more susceptible. Lice are very small and hard to spot, but the most common sign you'll see is your horse itching.
Mange is caused by a mite that feeds on the debris on the surface of the skin, and is particularly attracted to the feathers of the lower limbs (hence the name 'feather mite'). The mites crawl along the skin, which is very irritating for a horse, causing him to stamp and rub his lower limbs. It can lead to a horse inflicting injuries on himself, which can become quite severe, causing pain and potentially lameness.

RINGWORM
Ringworm is a skin infection caused by a dermatophyte ('skin loving') fungus. It causes skin lesions that usually start as small raised spots from which the hair is lost. The spots can spread and a thick, dry and crumbly scab may form. It's easy to confuse these scabs with rain scald, so speak to your vet as soon as you see the symptoms. The ringworm fungus can live in the environment (for example in rugs and wood fixtures around the stables) for up to 11 years and is also highly contagious, and can infect whole groups of horses in an outbreak.

FOLLICULITUS
This is usually a bacterial infection of a horse's hair follicles,' Gil says. 'It's most common in a horse's saddle area, and thrives in warm wet conditions, so keep a look out for it under rugs and as we head into spring.' A tell-tale sign of folliculitis is clusters of small red bumps or pustules that develop around hair follicles. These can break open and crust over, leaving your horse's skin feeling painful and tender.

THRUST

Compressed soil with poor drainage provides conditions where bacteria can thrive, which can then infect a horse's foot – specifically the troughs of the frog and the crevice between the heel bulbs,' says Gil. A common sign of thrush is a smelly, black discharge. While a horse with the condition isn't likely to be in pain at first, it can penetrate further into the foot and begin to cause him distress.