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SWEET ITCH

What is sweet itch?

Sweet Itch is a skin disease (sometimes called summer itch or seasonal allergic dermatitis) and is caused by an allergy to the saliva of certain biting flies or midges (*Culicoides* spp.). It is characterized by intense itching, and affected animals may spend hours rubbing against trees, fences, doors or anything else available. This results in damage to the skin and hair especially down the upper neck, back and tail base. In severe cases the entire mane and forelock may be rubbed out and the skin over the ears, neck, withers and tail becomes thickened, dry, rough and hairless.

How and when does it occur?

Not all horses that are bitten by midges develop sweet itch and a genetic predisposition is suspected. Affected horses have a true hypersensitivity to the saliva of these biting insects. Signs can occur from a very young age and usually become more severe each year. Some breeds are affected more than others. Signs are seen during the warmer months when the flies are active. These tend to feed in the early morning and late afternoon and can often be seen on the horse's belly and neck.

Control and treatment

It is important to remember that as this is an allergic condition, symptoms can be triggered by the bites of only a very small number of midges. Control, therefore, depends on reducing, if not removing attack by these insects. Affected horses should be stabled between 4 pm and 7 am. The stables can be made insect-proof by using screens and insect repellent strips. Special fine mesh fly sheets can be worn to reduce exposure. Fly repellent or insecticidal sprays or creams should be used especially on the mane, tail, withers and head but also along the midline and neck. Insect repellent tags such as those used on cattle can also be attached to the horse's head collar.



Base of pony's mane showing signs of irritation ("sweet itch")

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These measures are not effective in all horses. The environment can be important. The immature stages of these flies live in water so, if possible, affected horses should be moved away from areas where there is mud, wet sand, ponds, streams or rivers nearby.

Topically applied creams and lotions containing antihistamines or corticosteroids are expensive and usually not helpful. Corticosteroids given orally on a daily basis work the best. It is important to realize that corticosteroid treatment does not cure the condition but merely relieves the itching and that the medication can have serious side effects. Nevertheless, in some cases, it is an acceptable risk in order to relieve severe persistent distress and discomfort.