

Sweet Itch

Sweet itch is a problem that affects thousands of horses, ponies and donkeys. In fact, it is reported that 5% (1 in 20) suffer from the condition every year.

Although all breeds can be affected, native breeds suffer most while thoroughbreds are less likely to have an issue.

What Causes Sweet Itch?

It is a skin condition caused by a hypersensitive reaction to the saliva of midges when they bite. The immune system overreacts and causes a reaction.

The main culprit is the Culicoide species of midges but bites from stable flies and black flies have the same effect.

What To Look Out For

These include:

- Severe itching (pruritis)
- Hair loss
- Thickening and flakiness of the skin, predominantly over the top of the tail and the mane.

In severe cases, weeping sores (exudative dermatitis) can be seen, with yellowing crusts of dried serum noted over more extensive areas of the body such as the head, neck, withers and belly.

The horse or pony will be incredibly uncomfortable and will pace, roll and attempt to scratch themselves on anything they can reach such as stable doors, fence posts, gates etc. Once sores develop, treatment is essential to stop them developing a secondary infection.





Diagnosis

Diagnosis is not usually difficult. The clinical symptoms and the seasonal nature (spring, summer and autumn) of sweet itch are strong indicators for a diagnosis. Symptoms can persist all year round with bad cases only just recovering before the flies start again in spring.

Sweet itch is rarely seen in horses less than a year old, but most horses that develop this condition have experienced mild clinical signs before hitting 5 years old.

A blood test (ELISA) or intradermal skin testing can be performed to determine what is causing the allergic response, but this is rarely required in sweet itch cases.



Treatment and prevention

Sweet Itch is an allergic reaction and therefore an immune system problem. Unfortunately, these are notoriously complicated and difficult to deal with.

A) Prevent midges making contact

- Culicoides midges are around from as early as late March until the end of October, depending on geographical location, and attempts should be made to avoid them
- Avoid keeping your horse in damp boggy areas where midges breed
- Stable your horse when midges feed the most i.e. dawn and dusk
- Close stable doors at these times or install fine mesh over openings
- Use stable fans – the midges find it difficult to fly when the fan is on
- Use close fitting cover-all rugs covering your horse's body and face
- Coating the horse or pony in a fine oil such as liquid paraffin to prevent midges making contact.
- Insecticide products such as permethrin or DEET based insecticides are commonly used but have varying results.

B) Reduce the allergic reaction

- Topical lotions
- Oral supplementation with Cavalesse®. This contains nicotinamide to assist the natural immune system response
- Oral or injectable steroids. Use with care as, although very effective, they carry a small risk of laminitis and should never be used in active laminitic cases.
- Desensitisation injections can be used. This involves multiple injections of very low doses of the midge saliva itself