

Summer Skin Allergies

In the UK it is thought that over 50,000 horses suffer from summer skin-related problems and conditions. There are a number of causes of these conditions, such as feed hypersensitivity, nettle stings, and allergy to the saliva from insect bites (sweet itch).



Depending on the cause of the allergy, it is always best to remove your horse from the source of the allergy where possible, however keeping your horse away from all flies is extremely difficult.

Sweet itch is an allergy to bites of the Culicoides fly (midges) and is the most common summer skin allergy. When a horse with sweet itch is bitten by a midge, the horse's immune system reacts to a protein in the midge's saliva which causes the immune system to over-react and attack its own cells which leads to the extreme allergic reaction of intense itchy skin that these horses suffer. All breeds and types of horses, ponies and donkeys are susceptible to sweet itch, although some breeds are more susceptible than others.

Clinical signs of sweet itch:

Midges usually feed along the back of the horse including the head, mane, withers, rump and tail. Clinical signs are often first seen in these areas, however in some horses other sites can be primarily affected, for example the belly, or the ears, or the sides of the face.

Clinical signs of sweet itch include severe pruritis (intense itching) and hair loss over the affected area. As the horse rubs itself the skin will become bald, inflamed, crusty and sore. In time as the condition progresses the skin thickens and becomes wrinkled, the hair is sparse and coarse with flaky dandruff. Weeping sores can develop, which if left untreated can lead to secondary bacterial infection. The itching can become so severe that the horse scratches itself on anything in reach. This can lead to a marked change in the horse's temperament as the horse remains constantly agitated from the continuous itching.

During the winter months, a horse's skin may totally recover. However the disease often returns in the spring at the first contact with flies. It is therefore essential for owners to be aware of the potential risk of purchasing a horse during the winter months when there are little or no signs of sweet itch. If a horse has a mane and tail that look suspicious, it is advisable to inspect it closely for signs of hair loss which may suggest sweet itch in the summer.

Prevention and Control of Sweet Itch:

Sweet itch is notoriously difficult to manage. There is no cure for sweet itch and once a horse develops sweet itch it will recur every summer. Prevention and control consists of controlling the horse's environment and should include a three-pronged approach – decreasing the horse's exposure to flies, killing the flies that do attack the horse and stopping the itching.



Top tips to help prevent summer skin allergies:

1. Decrease Exposure:

- Using a fly rug with hood and mask to cover all of the areas of the horse susceptible to bites is the most effective fly protection when out at grass
- Stabling at dawn and dusk as midges generally feed most at these times. In the summer months it is safest to stable your horse from 4pm to 8am
- Putting a fan in the stable will create air movement which midges don't like
- Fitting a fly screen onto stable windows and the door can protect horses against midges entering the stable
- Moving the horse away from standing water and boggy land as midges like to breed on wet land and near water sources
- Oils and greases can be applied to problem areas as midges don't like to bite through layers of oil

2. Insect Repellents:

- Some insect repellents are more effective than others! Please discuss with your vet which is likely to be most suitable for your horse

3. Stopping the Itching:

- When a horse has been bitten corticosteroids can bring temporary relief by depressing the immune system, but they can have serious side effects such as laminitis.
- Antihistamines are rarely effective in horses
- Soothing lotions can help to relieve the itching and reduce inflammation
- None of these will deter further midge attacks

4. Maintaining healthy skin:

- Cavalesse started before the fly season can help to maintain healthy skin in horses prone to summer skin allergies. An oral solution is given daily on a treat.

What is Cavalesse?

Cavalesse is a food supplement to help keep your horse's skin healthy during summer months.

One of the key ingredients is nicotinamide, a type of vitamin B3, which is known to have a specific effect on the immune system within the skin. Nicotinamide has been known to reduce the production of histamine and to improve the skin barrier by increasing the amount of natural fats in the skin's surface.

Nicotinamide is easy to administer and has no known side-effects when used topically or orally at the recommended dosages. Cavalesse is most effective if it is started before the fly season.

MKTG/Equine/Collateral/EquineInformation/Summer Skin Allergies



Scarsdale Vets - Equine
Markeaton Lane
Derby
DE22 4NH
Telephone: 01332 294929
www.scarsdalevets.com/equine

