

Sweet itch owner information

Sweet itch, or insect hypersensitivity, is caused by an allergic reaction to the saliva in midge bites. Horses become very itchy and can cause self-trauma to their manes, tails and coats and will be most severely affected in the summer months, when the biting midges are most prevalent.

Sweet itch can be a debilitating condition, with affected horses being uncontrollably itchy. Rubbed skin can be prone to secondary infections. Some horses become so distressed by sweet itch that they cannot be ridden in the summer months.

Sweet itch cannot be cured, but actions can be taken to lessen the symptoms and improve the comfort of affected horses in the summer months.



Causes of sweet itch

Some breeds of horses and ponies appear to be more predisposed to sweet itch. There appears to be a genetic component with offspring of affected horses often having the condition. Sweet itch tends to be noticed from four years of age and can appear to worsen with age.

Symptoms of sweet itch

- Mild to severe itchiness. Seasonal itchiness from spring to autumn which coincides with the midge season.
- Rubbed mane and tail.
- Areas of sore, broken skin.

It is important to rule out other causes of itchiness such as parasites, allergies and infections. Some of these conditions can appear similar to sweet itch, so sometimes further tests are required.

Management advice

One of the most important strategies for managing sweet itch is limiting the exposure of affected horses to the biting midges.

- Stable horses at dusk and dawn. This is when the midges are most active. Avoid riding at these times. Some owners prefer to turn out their horses overnight, when there is less midge activity.
- Avoid areas where there is woodland and standing water, as this is the midge's preferred environment.
- Stable horses on still days, turnout on windy days. Midges are not great at flying on breezy days, so opt to turn out your horses on these days when midge bite risk is less. More exposed fields are better for sweet itch turnout.
- When turned out, use a full-body sweet itch rug. Sweet itch rugs are thicker than fly rugs, so midge bites cannot penetrate and have greater coverage of the body.
- Use insect repellents when turned out and during ridden work. Deosect is a prescription only product, it can be effective as a longer-lasting insect repellent. Other permethrin/pymethrin based products such as 'Switch', and 'TriTec14' are available without prescription. 'Avon

Skin So Soft' spray is anecdotally thought to stop midges being able to land on the coat and bite.

- Use mesh covers for windows/stable openings to prevent midge entry. Stable fans can be used to increase air currents and prevent midges flying.
- If your horse is getting secondary skin infections on rubbed areas, speak to a vet about how to best manage these infections, as these can contribute to discomfort and itchiness.
- Ask your vet about the 'Insol' injection prior to the midge season. Insol was originally developed for ringworm, however it was found to be useful for horses struggling with sweet itch.
- If your horse is uncontrollably itchy despite management strategies, we may consider giving your horse medication to relieve the itch, such as steroids or antihistamines.
- In some sweet itch cases we may suggest performing intradermal skin testing to confirm an insect hypersensitivity, and then immunotherapy could be used to 'adjust' the horses reaction to the midge saliva.
- Anecdotally, some horse owners have reported improvements by feeding Brewer's yeast or Niacinamide/Nicotinamide supplements such as Cavalesse. Feeding linseed oil is also supposed to reduce itchiness due to the balance of Omega-three and Omega-six but more research is required to prove these possible benefits.

If you have any questions about sweet itch management, or would like to discuss your individual horse, please give us a call on 01260 280800.