Decrease exposure

Culicoides midges thrive in marshy, boggy fields, therefore it is advisable, although not always practical, to relocate a horse, if it is susceptible to sweet itch, to insect-free areas such as exposed, windy fields or chalk-based grassland. Grazing should be well-drained and away from rotting vegetation such as muck heaps, which may attract flies. Water troughs should be cleaned regularly to prevent flies from breeding there. The most effective protection for a horse out at grass are light rugs and hoods which can cover all the areas of the horse susceptible to bites.

Insect repellents

Insect repellents and insecticides may help control the Culicoides midges and prevent them from biting the horse. Insecticides containing pyrethrins or pyrethroids, can be effective and these often have to be applied either weekly or fortnightly. Benzyl benzoate will also keep flies away, but it has to be constantly reapplied. Insect repellents should be applied well before signs develop and should not be applied to inflamed or broken skin. All insect repellents and insecticides should be applied with care.

Stopping the itching

If a horse is bitten, corticosteroids may bring temporary relief by depressing the immune system but there are serious side effects such as laminitis. Antihistamines are effective, but high doses are required and they tend to cause drowsiness. Soothing lotions will relieve the itching and reduce inflammation but they will not deter further midge attacks.

Maintaining a healthy skin before and through the critical midge season

Fidavet Cavalesse® and Cavalesse® Topical are available to maintain a healthy skin in horses prone to summer skin allergies. An oral solution is given daily on a treat (e.g. piece of bread) and has had very good results in many cases of horses prone to allergies.
Sweet itch, or Summer Seasonal Recurrent Dermatitis (SSRD), is an allergic reaction to the saliva of Culicoides midges. When a horse 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 attack its own cells and leads to the extreme allergic reaction.

**Advice on Sweet Itch**

Culicoides midges usually feed along the dorsal surface (back) of the horse including the head, mane, withers, rump and dock (tail) and clinical signs are often first seen in these areas.

They include severe pruritus (intense itching) and hair loss over the affected area, which is most commonly the tail and mane. The skin can become bald, inflamed, crusty and sore and as the condition progresses it thickens, becomes wrinkled and the hair becomes sparse and coarse with flaky dandruff. Exudative dermatitis (weeping sores, sometimes with a yellow crust of dried serum) may also develop which, if left untreated, can lead to secondary bacterial infection. These lesions are often found along the spine at the mane, forelock or tail and, in more severe cases, they spread down the body to the abdomen, saddle area, sides of the head, sheath and into the legs.

The horse may scratch its tail vigorously in an effort to keep the flies away and the itching can become so severe that it scratches itself on anything in reach including posts, stable doors and trees. Excessive mutual grooming from field companions is common and horses have been known to roll, scratch at their mane with their hind hooves and bite their own tail in an attempt to stop the itching. There can be a marked change in the horse’s temperament and it can either become lethargic with frequent yawning or agitated and impatient, with a lack of concentration when ridden. A horse may also shake its head or become restless if flying insects are close by.

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**

Sweet itch is both an allergic reaction and an immune system problem which is notoriously difficult to manage, however, horse owners often prefer to cope on their own instead of calling their vets. There is no cure for the disease and once a horse develops sweet itch it recurs every summer proving a management nightmare for its owner.

Prevention and control consist of controlling the horse’s environment and should include a three-pronged approach – decreasing the horses’ exposure to the Culicoides midges, killing the flies that do attack the horse and stopping the itching.

**Breed types and age**

All breeds and types of horses, ponies and donkeys are susceptible to sweet itch, although some breeds more so than others. For example, up to 30 percent of Fresian horses are affected, as are Icelandic ponies and Haflingers and sweet itch is rare in English Thoroughbreds. It is thought that sweet itch is hereditary and stress (for example moving a horse to a new home), sickness or severe injury can increase the risk of more mature horses developing the condition.

When sweet itch is more prevalent

The disease is particularly prevalent during the summer months, between April and late October, when midges are most active. However, with climate change bringing warmer winters, sweet itch can now be present well into the winter months. Horses are generally vulnerable to being bitten either early in the morning or late in the afternoon on calm, humid days, and it is essential to be aware of the Culicoides midges breeding in wet, muddy areas such as marshes, land around waterways, such as rivers and lakes, and woodland and should be avoided if horses are prone to the condition. Their larvae can survive severe frosts but not prolonged drought conditions.

The disease is not contagious; however, if a premises is particularly susceptible to attacks by Culicoides midges then more than one horse in a field may develop the condition.

**Clinical signs**

**Breeds of horses affected**

Sweet Itch is easy to diagnose because of the seasonality and obvious clinical signs.

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