

WHAT IS SWEET ITCH?

Sweet itch, also known as Equine Insect Bite Hypersensitivity or Summer Seasonal Recurrent Dermatitis, is the most common allergic skin reaction in horses.

CAUSES

Sweet itch is an allergic reaction to the protein in the saliva of biting midges (culicoids) but may include other blood-sucking flies and insects. The allergy creates an irritable and sore skin condition (dermatitis) and affects the mane and tail areas of the horse where the midge bites, whereas other biting insects focus on the stomach region.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Horses are mostly affected between March-November when the biting insects are most active, as the temperature is warmer and the air is humid.

If affected, horses may be intensely itchy and scratch/rub themselves on any available surface leading to loss of mane/tail and in severe cases broken skin and sores will develop. This is obviously a welfare concern and once the horse is affected, can prove very difficult to treat.

February is a good time of year to start thinking about the insect (especially the Scottish midge) season that comes with slightly warmer, wetter weather. Horses unfortunately can suffer from intense skin hypersensitivity to insect bites, commonly leading to the clinical presentation of 'sweet itch', an allergic skin disease.



DIAGNOSIS

The presence of these signs is typically used to diagnose sweet itch, but many other allergies show similar symptoms so further tests from a veterinary surgeon may be necessary to identify what's triggering the reaction.

PREVENTATIVE CARE

Once a horse has been diagnosed with sweet itch, there is sadly no cure. Taking steps pre-season means your horse is more protected in advance of their immune system being stimulated leading to these severe clinical signs.



These steps can include:

- Use of rugs to cover/limit exposure to insects
- Considering stabling horses around dusk/dawn when insect activity can be highest.
- Use of an effective insect repellent.
- Stabling/turnout AWAY from water sources where insect activity is high.

TREATMENT

While there's no cure for sweet itch, a vet may be able to recommend medications to ease the symptoms. There are various medications you can discuss with your vet including:

- The use of an injectable vaccine that can offer a degree of protection in some horses.
- Anti-inflammatories and antihistamines may be prescribed by a vet to reduce swelling and itching but shouldn't be used alone or for long term use.