

SWEET ITCH AND URTICARIA

Seasonal changes are notorious for causing havoc in our horses. From the mild gas colic to the common urticaria and midge bite hypersensitivity.

What is Urticaria?

Urticaria or hives is the development of small lumps on your horse's skin caused by an allergic reaction to a change in feed, midge bites, or reaction to certain chemicals or allergens. The episodes may be limited to one or two occurrences that respond to treatment or may become recurrent episodes that require further investigation. Horses showing signs of urticaria may have welts or lumps over limited parts of their body extending to the whole body, they may itch profusely, have swollen lips or eyelids, elevated temperature, rapid breathing and be hot to the touch.

Sweet itch

Sweet itch is a common seasonal dermatosis that occurs mainly in summer due to a hypersensitivity to biting midges. These midges, called *Culicoides* midges are the same midges that carry African Horse Sickness.

How can I prevent midges biting my horse?



As many of you are probably aware, a large part of the prevention of horse sickness lies in vector protection. In other words, the stringent use of midge repellents and control methods can deter midges and flies. Since midges are not flies however, common fly sprays are not adequate in warding off these little critters and the use of midge repellent substances are strongly recommended.

How can I treat sweet itch?

There are several ways in which to provide some relief for those very itchy, irritated horses. It is important to differentiate between midge bite hypersensitivity and other causes of urticaria such as feed sensitivity and/or fynbos/ pollen/ dust allergies. The first step in controlling the allergy is to reduce the number of bites from the midges. This is done in a few ways:

- Repellents: Tabard or Peaceful Sleep that contain DEET(diethyl toluamide). Please consult your vet as how to use it effectively on your horse
- Literature states that the use of oils may be effective in reducing midge attacks as the midge tends to avoid contact with a film of oil. Please use with caution in horses with white faces as this can exacerbate sun burn. The oil is easily lost through sweating and rain and may have to be reapplied numerous times to be effective.
- Avoid marsh areas and stagnant water. Ensure pastures have good drainage and eliminate bodies of water that might collect.
- Stable your horse for the period when midges are most active: 2 hrs before dusk until 2hrs after dawn.
- Installing fans in stables creates less favourable conditions for the midges.
- Applying mosquito nets/grids on stable windows in areas with severe populations

The use of insecticides in conjunction with midge repellents will reduce the number of flies and/or mites that may cause irritation to the already irritated areas. Permethrin products are most effective and should be used as directed.

Severely itchy horses may require medical intervention to minimise scratching and rubbing and causing injury to the skin of the itchy areas. These treatments would include the use of systemic cortisone injections as well as topical creams, lotions and/or shampoos. Please consult your vet in this case.

The use of fly sheets is a very effective way in which to decrease midge attacks and eliminates the need for insecticides and oils or greases. Effective management of sweet itch is difficult, frustrating and relies solely on the decline in midge numbers for resolution. However, it is seasonal and if your horse has it one year it is likely to get it every year.

We are now fortunate to have access to allergy testing that allows us to identify the causative agents for the allergic response. In severe cases we can get immunotherapy developed to help your horse overcome their allergy. Should you have any concerns regarding your horse's condition please chat to one of our vets.



Allergic reaction and itching from midge bites, note 'wrinkles' on the skin



Typical Sweet Itch Symptoms – ridges and hair-loss along top line and mane

References:

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