



## Sweet Itch

### What is sweet itch?

Sweet itch, otherwise known as Insect Bite Hypersensitivity, is an allergic reaction to proteins in the saliva of biting *Culicoides* midges. Although all horses are bitten by these flies, only some develop an allergy. This disease causes immense distress in severely affected animals and can be a major welfare concern.

The allergic reaction causes extreme itchiness which tends to be first noticed at around 4 years of age, and often worsens as the horse gets older. Sweet itch is mainly seen in the late spring and summer when the midges are out although the sweet itch season can be longer in mild winters. It is generally worse in hot humid weather and at dawn and dusk. Horses often scratch their mane, tail, belly and sometimes other areas as the primary sign, causing broken hairs, hair loss, redness, bleeding and skin thickening. With persistent irritation, the skin thickens and discolours and hair regrowth is poor. It is an extremely uncomfortable disease for both horses and owners. Sometimes the horse may get a secondary skin infection after self-trauma from scratching.



### Diagnosis

Diagnosis is usually based on seasonal itchiness as described above, although other problems such as lice, mites and other allergies can appear similar to sweet itch and should be ruled out.

A more definitive diagnosis can be made using an intradermal skin test where extracts of possible allergens such as midges, pollens etc are injected in tiny amounts under the skin and any local reaction (swelling) is measured.

Numerous blood tests are also marketed for detecting allergies in horses but the usefulness of these is questionable and their use not currently recommended.



### Treatment

- Certain drugs can be useful to suppress itchiness when faced with the onset of signs of sweet itch including steroids, oclacitinib and sometimes antihistamines.
- However, often these drugs are only partially effective and rarely suitable for long term control.
- Some anti-itch shampoos are available and fatty acid supplements may have anti-inflammatory effects





# Kings Bounty Equine Practice Client Fact Sheet

## Prevention

The most effective way to manage any allergy is to avoid exposure to what you are allergic to. Thus, fly avoidance is the ideal approach but is very hard to achieve adequately.

- Frequent application of fly repellents
- Use of fly rugs and hoods
- Stabling in the afternoon and evenings
- Ensure turnout is away from wooded areas
- Ponds and ditches can all increase fly numbers as they breed in still water and do not like windy conditions
- Midges cannot fly if there are wind speeds above 5mph. Turning out onto a field which is NOT sheltered, such as a windy hill top may be beneficial, as strong breezes keep the midges off
- If practicable, a fan installed inside the building to create wind speeds of over 5mph can help
- If feeding hay in the fly season then put the hay in an exposed area of the field and not along a sheltered hedge
- Immunotherapy involves various “vaccine-like” treatments that aim to alter the abnormal immune response to the proteins in the midge’s saliva, although none have yet been proven to be effective



## Welfare

To reduce self trauma, you can provide less rough items for the horse to rub on instead of anything they can reach. For example, fixing textured rubber doormats over the hard edges of the stable doorframe will prevent them damaging their skin on the wooden parts, but still allow them to get some relief from scratching. Relocation to a different geographical area may be a last resort. If you think your horse is itchy, please call the vet as there are many itchy conditions that are easily treatable and preventable.