

## Sweet Itch

Sweet Itch (Summer Seasonal Recurrent Dermatitis) is a condition which affects all breeds of horses, ponies and donkeys. Although typically native breeds are affected more than the thoroughbreds. It is estimated that about one in twenty animals are affected in the UK. Sweet Itch is an allergic reaction to insect bites the common culprit being the midge and results from an overactive immune system. In the process of repelling the invading insect saliva which contains harmless protein the animal attacks some of its own skin cells causing the damage described as Sweet Itch.

There are several species of the midge in the UK the main one responsible is the Culicoides Midge these prefer to feed from the body their common breeding site is wet moist soil and decaying vegetation. The Simulin Midge prefers oxygenated water sources such as slow moving streams or rivers. Both of these midges are nectar feeders and soon after hatching the females mate and require a blood meal to mature their eggs. They are poor flyers and can't fly in windy conditions which delay their mealtimes of dusk and dawn but all they do is simply wait until the wind calms or heavy rain stops and then feed later. Their larvae are able to survive severe frosts but can't survive severe drought conditions. To reduce the risk of midge attack moving the affected animal to a more exposed site or chalk based grassland could improve matters. An ideal place would be a bare hillside or costal site with a strong sea breeze. Ensure that grazing is well away from rotting vegetation e.g. a muckheap, rotting leaves or old feeding site.

### SYMPTOMS

Symptoms include acute itching, hair loss, thickening of the skin which can turn into weeping sores with a yellow crust of dried serum. Left untreated a secondary infection can develop. The area most affected is the top of the tail and mane, the neck, withers ears and in severe cases belly, saddle area.

To relieve the intense irritation the animal may swish its tail vigorously, roll frequently and attempt to scratch on anything in reach; quite often seeking out a field companion for mutual grooming. They may even drag themselves along the ground in an attempt to scratch their abdomen or sit like a dog and propel themselves round to relieve the intense itching.

The affected animal can have a marked change in temperament becoming lethargic with a lack of concentration when being ridden. They can become agitated with repeated headshaking at the sight of any flying insects.

Animals that go on to develop Sweet Itch usually show signs of the disease between the age of one and five, the onset of the first symptoms usually appear in the Autumn. Evidence shows that the stress of moving to a new home, injury or sickness can be a contributory factor when a mature animal suddenly develops new symptoms.

Sweet Itch is not contagious; when selling a horse it must be disclosed by the owner before the sale. For the purpose of vetting the allergy may be classed as unsoundness.



## TREATMENT

At present there is no cure for Sweet Itch. Every spring, summer and autumn can be a distressing time for both horse owner and equine alike. The animals comfort and wellbeing are down to its owner's management. If you own an animal with Sweet Itch you must be prepared to treat him twenty four seven.

First and Foremost you Must Minimise Midge Attack

Stable at dawn and dusk if it is not possible to remove to a more suitable sight mentioned above; closing the stable doors and windows when they are at their peak can help; install a ceiling mounted fan to create breezy conditions less favourable for the midge.

Use an insecticidal shampoo regularly and remember to rinse thoroughly as soap residue will create dandruff and make him even itchier.

Most insect repellents are effective against flies but have little if no effect on the Culicoided Midge. DEET (the acronym for N N-Diethyl-m-toluamide) has been proven to be highly effective and is the active ingredient in many midge and mosquito repellent used by humans. Research has shown that the higher the concentration of DEET in a repellent the more effective and long lasting it is likely to be.

Benzyl Benzoate was originally used to treat scabies in humans and has been used for many years to combat Sweet Itch. It is a milky-white liquid which should be thoroughly massaged into the skin daily, however it must not be used on the horse if there is hair loss and the skin is broken. It can be obtained in large quantities from any good pharmacist. Note that gloves should be worn when applying insecticides including Benzyl Benzoate. Care should be taken when used on children's ponies as they can cause eye irritation and can easily be transferred from mane to fingers.

Be careful not to apply any irritant onto broken skin; if this is the case then soothing and healing agents need to be applied. Sudocreme, Calamine Lotion and Zinc and Castor Oil can bring relief but will not deter further attacks.

Coat the animals coat with baby oil, midges dislike contact with skin that is covered in a film. Remember that to be effective they need to be applied two or three times a day as in summer when a horses coat is short it does not retain any ingredient for very long and can be lost through rain or sweating.

The use of other insecticides including permethrin and related compounds tend to be longer lasting, but should be used with care. Permethrin is available by veterinary prescription; application instruction should be followed. Preparations containing tea tree oil, lavender oil, or chemical repellents that can cause an allergic skin reaction should be patch tested first on the neck or flank of the horse first. Look out for any sign of swelling or heat over a 24 hour period before using extensively.

The most effective and safe way of protecting your animal is to purchase a fly sheet or a Boett Veterinary Blanket there are several available from all major saddle retailers; however these do offer a lot of protection and lessen the need to use insecticides, oils and greases.

The use of anti-histamines may bring some relief but high doses are necessary to have any effect and can make the horse drowsy. Corticosteroids injections or in tablet form may bring temporary relief but have drastic side effects and can bring on bouts of laminitis. Given time the dose has to be increased becoming less effective requiring larger and more frequent doses which in turn increases the threat of laminitis.

