

Swiftsure Equine Veterinary Services

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Sweet Itch

Sweet Itch, also known as Insect-bite Hypersensitivity, is an allergic reaction to the saliva of biting insects, in particular, Culicoides midges, better known as “No-See-Ums”. The allergic reaction can cause intense itching and bumps along the mane and tail head as well as the belly of horses. Attempts to relieve the itching can lead to abraded skin wounds, imbedded foreign material and secondary infections, intensifying the irritation and propagating the self-trauma. Horses suffering from relentless itching, and painful skin infections are also prone to other physiological conditions such as sleep deprivation, fatigue, irritability and even gastric ulcers.

Management of this problem is very frustrating for owners. In order to control it, treatment needs to start BEFORE the horse starts exhibiting signs, so that the allergic reaction and level of itchiness has not had the chance to flare. Once the immune system has had a chance to react and become hypersensitive, controlling the itchiness and preventing the horse from scratching and propagating the reaction is extremely difficult.

Here are some of the management strategies:

- 1) Limit standing water which attracts midges and provides their breeding ground and refresh water buckets frequently
- 2) Bring your horse inside when midges are most active at dawn and dusk
- 3) Install fans in the stalls and barns
- 4) Invest in a Sweet-Itch blanket that covers nearly the entire body. Top Choice: Rambo Fly Buster, with impregnated Permethrin. Available in US.
- 5) Apply insect repellent very frequently.
- 6) Feed supplements high in Omega 3 Fatty Acids, Vitamin E and Zinc.
- 7) Apply thick topical creams such as Vaseline, Zinc cream, “Bag Balm” or oils such as Skin So Soft, Coconut oil or Vitamin E oil to act as a physical barrier.
- 8) Apply medicated creams or ointments to treat inflammation, irritation and infection.
- 9) Administer medications such as antihistamines to suppress the body’s allergic reaction.
- 10) Employ desensitization immunotherapy to reduce your horse’s sensitivity to insect bites and other allergies.
- 11) Start treatments 1 month prior to allergy season.
- 12) Move your horse to an environment with a lower biting insect population

There is no cure for this condition, so prevention and early treatment are key to keeping your horse comfortable during the spring and summer months. The midge season is typically April thru September, and the midges are most active at dawn and dusk. So start treatment in March before the midge has a chance to bite your horse.

Please contact us to discuss dermatologist recommended insect repellents, supplements, topical and oral medications and intra dermal allergy testing to control the allergic reactions.