

Owners of horses that suffer with sweet itch face a battle every summer to keep their horse comfortable. Sweet itch is a hypersensitivity reaction to insect saliva and results from an over-vigorous release of histamine by the horse's immune system. The biting insect responsible for sweet itch is the midge fly 'Culicoides'. The adult midges are most active in twilight, calm conditions. Breeding sites are commonly in wet soil or moist decaying vegetation.

Symptoms include severe pruritus (itching), hair loss, skin thickening and flaky dandruff. Exudative dermatitis (weeping sores, sometimes with a yellow crust of dried serum) may occur. Without attention sores can suffer secondary infections. The top of the tail and the mane are the most commonly affected areas. The horse may swish its tail vigorously, roll frequently and attempt to scratch on anything within its reach.

When we are called out to horses suffering from this condition we will prescribe medication to reduce the immune-system response. A steroid medication called Prednisolone is usually needed. This decreases the itching associated with sweet itch by "dampening down" the immune system slightly. We may also have to treat any broken skin and secondary infections.

However, as with so many conditions we see in horses, control is vastly more effective than treatment:

- Avoid marshy, boggy fields. Ensure pasture is well drained and that horses are kept away from rotting hay, feeding areas or rotting leaves.
- Stable your horse at dusk and dawn, when midge feeding is at its peak. Fly screens on the stable door and fans in the stable also help keep midges away.
- Turn out affected horses in full body fly-sheets (covering neck and belly) and use generous quantities of insect repellent (there is a wide range of these available and we recommend you trial a number of them and find what works for your horse).
- Fidavet Cavalesse: a natural food supplement containing the active ingredient Nicotinamide (a type of Vitamin B3). This drug reduces the 'immune system over-reaction' seen in sweet itch by reducing histamine production. It also improves the skin oil barrier by increasing the amount of natural fats in the skin's surface, helping provide a natural barrier to the midge. Cavalesse comes in both an oral form, and a topical (cream) form. The products can be used separately or in conjunction with one another for maximum benefit. It works best if given a month or so before the allergy season starts and it needs to be continued throughout the risk period.

If you would like any further information please do not hesitate to call us at the practice on  
**01666 826456.**