

Horse Health:

Sweet Itch

What is it?

Sweet itch is one of the most common and frustrating skin conditions in horses. It can cause severe discomfort and requires careful management.

Sweet itch, also known as **Culicoides hypersensitivity** or **summer seasonal recurrent dermatitis**, is an allergic skin condition. It occurs when a horse has an exaggerated immune response to the saliva of biting midges, particularly **Culicoides species**. Unlike ordinary fly irritation, sweet itch causes intense itching and skin damage, making it a serious welfare issue rather than a minor annoyance.

What causes it?

The condition is triggered by **midge bites**. When midges feed, they inject saliva into the horse's skin. In sensitive horses, the immune system overreacts to proteins in this saliva, releasing inflammatory chemicals like histamine that cause severe itching and inflammation. The problem is seasonal because midges are most active in **spring and summer**, especially in warm, damp, and sheltered environments.

What horses are at risk?

Any horse can develop sweet itch, but some are more vulnerable:

- **Genetics:** Certain breeds, such as Icelandic horses and native ponies, are more prone.
- **Environment:** Horses living near water, woodland, or marshy areas are at higher risk because these are prime midge habitats.

- **History:** Once a horse develops sweet itch, it usually recurs every year.

What are the symptoms?

Sweet itch typically appears in **late spring** and worsens through summer. Common signs include:

- **Intense itching (pruritus):** Horses rub against fences, trees, or stable walls.
- **Hair loss and broken hairs:** Especially along the mane, tail base, and withers.
- **Skin changes:** Thickened, scabby, or crusty skin; sores from self-trauma.
- **Behavioural changes:** Irritability, restlessness, and even aggression due to discomfort.

If left untreated, secondary infections can develop, making the condition harder to manage.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually based on clinical signs and seasonal pattern. Your vet may recommend additional tests to rule out other causes of itching, such as lice, mites, or fungal infections. In some cases, allergy testing can confirm sensitivity to midges, but this is rarely necessary for routine cases.

How can it be treated or managed?

There is **no cure**, but sweet itch can be managed effectively with a combination of strategies:

1. Prevent insect bites

- **Sweet itch rugs:** Special rugs cover the mane, tail, and belly to

protect against midges.

- **Fly repellents:** Apply regularly, especially during dawn and dusk when midges are most active.
- **Stabling:** Bring horses in during peak midge activity (late afternoon and evening).
- **Environmental control:** Reduce standing water and manure heaps to limit breeding sites.

2. Relieve itching and inflammation

- **Soothing creams and shampoos:** Calm irritated skin and reduce discomfort.
- **Medications:** Vets may prescribe antihistamines or even corticosteroids (for severe cases). These reduce inflammation but must be used carefully to avoid side effects.
- **Nicotinamide (Vitamin B3):** Sometimes used to help manage itching.
- **Cool water bathing:** Helps soothe the skin during hot months.

3. Treat secondary infections

If sores become infected, your vet may prescribe antibiotics or antiseptic washes.

Can it be prevented?

Complete prevention is difficult, but you can **significantly reduce** the risk for affected horses and ponies:

- **Start early:** Begin protective measures before midge season starts.
- Use fly rugs and repellents consistently.
- Choose turnout wisely: Avoid damp, sheltered fields; opt for breezy, open areas.
- Stable during high-risk times: Especially at dawn and dusk.

- Fans or a through current of air in stables: Midgees dislike wind, so creating airflow can help.