



## AN OWNER'S GUIDE TO SWEET ITCH

### Introduction:

Sweet Itch, also known as Summer Seasonal Recurrent Dermatitis (SSRD) is a non contagious allergic (hypersensitivity) reaction to a protein in the saliva of the *Culicoides* midge. The immune system overreacts to a midge bite and mistakenly attacks the horse's own skin cells resulting in the classic symptoms of Sweet Itch.

The condition occurs all over the world and all horses, ponies and donkeys can be affected. All breeds are susceptible, although it is rare in English Thoroughbreds. It is thought that there is a certain level of genetic predisposition but older horses can also develop the condition if environmental conditions favour the midge population and risk factors. It is a condition that is likely to recur seasonally and may worsen with age and a change in location.

The usual Sweet Itch season runs between April and October when *Culicoides* midges are most active, however, mild winters can prolong this. *Culicoides* breed in wet, muddy areas so marshes, land around waterways, woodland and muck heaps are ideal sites for them to thrive. They are less than 2mm in size and can only fly for short distances of around 100 metres. They generally feed at dusk and dawn so this is when the greatest risk is to sufferers, however, on humid, overcast days they may feed at any time.

### Symptoms

Symptoms include severe pruritis (intense itching), hair loss and flaky dandruff and as the condition progresses the skin can become thickened, bald and wrinkled. In severe conditions exudative dermatitis can occur, which consists of weeping sores, sometimes with a yellow crust of dried serum. The most commonly affected area is along the spine on the top of the tail, mane and forelock but in more severe cases the lesions can spread down the body to the saddle area, hips, abdomen, head, sheath and legs. Changes in temperament are common with affected animals displaying lethargy and frequent yawning or becoming agitated and impatient with a lack of concentration when ridden.

Sufferers will swish their tails vigorously and rub themselves on anything within reach including posts, stable doors and trees. They may partake in excessive mutual grooming with other horses, roll frequently, scratch at their mane with hind hoofs, bite or chew their own skin and head shake if flying insects are nearby.

The symptoms and time of year usually allow a straightforward diagnosis. Purchasers should be aware of the potential risk of buying a horse in winter as the skin can totally recover so that there is little or no sign of any symptoms.

### Prevention

Prevention is the key to reducing the suffering of those affected by the condition. There are 3 main strategies to adopt including management of the horse' environment, the use of protective rugs and the application of repellents.



The ideal area for a Sweet Itch sufferer to live would be on a dry, exposed hillside or a coastal location with strong onshore breezes. However, realistically this is not possible for most horse owners to achieve. There are steps that can be taken to make the most out of the horse's current environment such as ensuring that the muck heap is situated well away from stables and fields where horses are grazing. The pasture should be well drained and fallen leaves should be raked up and disposed of.

During dusk and dawn horses that are mildly affected should be stabled but for those that suffer severely this can be detrimental as they can cause a lot of damage to themselves rubbing against the stable walls. Midge screens and a large ceiling fan can help protect stabled horses from midge attack.

Removing midge breeding habitats is vital to keep numbers down so make sure muck is regularly removed from the stable and field, water buckets and troughs are cleaned and refreshed regularly, old hay is tidied up and fallen leaves and vegetation are cleared away. If feeding hay or providing field shelters try to avoid placing these next to high risk midge areas.

Specifically designed Sweet Itch rugs are essential to protect the horse from bites. These should be made from a fine mesh that midges cannot crawl through and should include a hood and large belly band. While maintaining these rugs can be expensive we identify them as one of the most effective means of reducing midge exposure in a given environment. In our experience they are far more effective than many of the insecticides and for significant sweet itch sufferers the use. As with many of the sweet itch preventative measures it is important to get the rugs on prior to them getting itchy.

Topical insect repellents and insecticides are widely used to deter or kill midges however, a patch test should always be carried before using a new product in case of any sensitivity to the active ingredients. Applying these products to broken or inflamed skin should always be avoided. Insect repellents and insecticides should be used well before any signs or symptoms develop. Active ingredients that are proven to work best against midges are DEET, pyrethrins or pyrethroids and benzyl benzoate. These products all have different active time periods so always read the label carefully and follow instructions. Gloves should always be worn when applying these products. These products should not be used as a substitute for a good fly rug.

An oil based lotion can be used to coat the horse's hair as midges dislike coming into contact with oily substances. Oil can be useful to use on areas such as the legs that are not covered by a Sweet Itch rug.

### **Treatment**

As Sweet Itch is an immune reaction it is very difficult to treat and there is no current cure. Corticosteroids can be used to depress the immune system in severe cases however this carries potential risk factors such as inducing laminitis. There is mixed evidence as to the effectiveness of using anti histamines in horses with some worry that they may cause drowsiness. The application of soothing lotions or steroid creams to irritated areas can bring some relief from itching and help to reduce inflammation. Frequent washing with an insecticidal shampoo can also help but care must be taken not to wash the horse so often that the skin is dried out.

### **Recommended Links**



[www.sweet-itch.co.uk](http://www.sweet-itch.co.uk)

[www.sweet-itch.org](http://www.sweet-itch.org)