

# Sweet-Itch in Horses

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## What is sweet itch?

Sweet itch is caused by an allergy to the saliva of the Culicoides midge, which is released when the midge bites your horse or pony. This leads to pruritis or itchiness, which causes the horse or pony to rub to relieve the sensation. The urge to rub can be so great that the skin is rubbed away leaving large sores. Inevitably, these sores are colonised by bacteria and a secondary skin infection or pyoderma develops. The midges only bite certain areas of the animal, most commonly attacking the base of the mane and/or tail. In a few animals, the midline of the abdomen in front of the sheath or udder is affected – sometimes without any mane or tail involvement. Sweet itch is a seasonal disease occurring in animals at grass from March to November. In mild, damp winters, midges can be present throughout the year. Ponies are more commonly affected than horses or donkeys and the condition is particularly common in Icelandics and Shetlands.

## How do I know if my animal has sweet itch?

The characteristic appearance of sweet itch is usually diagnostic – the broken bushy hairs at the base of the tail and mane and the ridges in the skin of the crest will be familiar to many. However, a number of factors can confuse the diagnosis such as tail rubbing during transport, or pushing the head under fences to graze (the grass is always greener...!). Occasionally an infestation with *Oxyuris equi*, the pinworm, causes irritation by laying eggs around the anus. This is a rare phenomenon now due to the widespread use of modern wormers.

## What can I do to prevent it?

Insect Repellents: As with most diseases, prevention is better than cure – by preventing the midge from biting, we can prevent the allergic itchiness from flaring up. In mild cases, commonly available insect repellents may be effective but they must be applied several times a day if they are to work properly. Products are now available that contain DEET, a longer lasting, more potent repellent used frequently in human products. Stabling: Changes in management can reduce the level of midge bites – stabling your horse and pony when the midges are most active (at dusk and dawn) can be effective. Turning out between 10am and 4pm will safely avoid these times. Keeping affected animals away from muck and compost heaps and boggy fields will help. A nice breezy field on top of a hill is the best place to avoid midges!

Fly Rugs: If these measures are not effective, the best way of preventing fly bites is to use a commercially available fly rug. 'Boett' rugs provide good coverage of all vulnerable areas and cost around £200. Horseware make the Sweet itch Hoody which is more reasonably priced. Barbed wire fencing is to be avoided if at all possible as an itchy pony can rip its new rug to shreds if it tries hard!

Medication: Some very severe cases of sweet itch will require medication during the summer months. A single injection of a long acting steroid called triamcinolone is very effective at stopping the itchiness of this condition. However, this drug requires careful use and can not be used in animals with laminitis, those that are overweight, have poorly trimmed feet or have access to lush grass. Once the itchiness has subsided, the use of an effective fly repellent and a rug such as a Boett or Horseware Sweet itch Hoody, is usually enough to prevent sweet itch from returning. An alternative is the daily administration of prednisolone tablets.

Other Treatments: Benzyl benzoate, which many have found effective in the past, is no longer available (a licence couldn't be obtained for its use). Feed supplements (including garlic) are unfortunately not effective in preventing midge bites in allergic animals. Shampoos can be prescribed to reduce the scurfiness and skin infections that often accompany sweet itch

**Sweet itch can be a very distressing condition that shouldn't be ignored but with careful management, even the most severely affected horses and ponies can lead a comfortable life.**