

Ask A Vet: Sweet Itch

Sunday, July 23, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My horse has several raised areas underneath his chest. Some are raw because he is biting at them. What is causing this and how do I stop it?"

Dear Reader,

While there are several different causes for what you describe, this time of the year it may be a condition called "sweet itch" or summer seasonal recurrent dermatitis. Sweet itch is caused by an allergic reaction to the saliva of the biting gnat *Culicoides*, often referred to as "no-see-ums". They live and breed in standing water and can travel up to a half a mile to feast on your horse's blood. They tend to be most active at dusk and dawn.

The symptoms are pretty straight forward. Within 48 to 72 hours from being bitten, the skin will become red and inflamed. Next, most of the hair around the bite will fall out. In the next day or so, you may find a crust has formed with a pus-like discharge underneath. In the chronic phase, the skin becomes thickened, blackened and wrinkled. Lesions can occur on top of your horse (ears, poll, mane, withers, rump and tail head) or underneath the head, chest and belly. The severity of the reaction has been known to increase with each subsequent year as the animal becomes more and more sensitive to the *Culicoides* saliva. However, most affected areas will return to normal once the weather turns cooler. Common treatment options include corticosteroids and antihistamines as prescribed by your veterinarian to reduce inflammation and itching. Covering the area with an oily substance such as baby oil or Skin So Soft will soothe and soften the skin as well as keeping the midges off. Avoid eucalyptus oil, tea tree oil, etc. as they may cause additional irritation. Supplementing your horse's diet with omega-3 fatty acids can also reduce skin inflammation.

While this can be a challenging disease to treat, thankfully there are some preventative measures you can take. Keeping the horses stalled for an hour prior to and after dawn and dusk will reduce the exposure to the bugs. Keep the air circulating in the stall with a fan to discourage the gnats from hanging around. Make sure the pastures and surrounding areas are well drained to reduce stagnant water. Keep your water tanks clean and filled with fresh water. Use insecticides/repellants on the horse and in the stalls. Finally, a full body mesh fly sheet with a tail flap and hood can cover vulnerable areas when they are outside.

-Dr. Wade Hammond