

## Factsheet: Sweet itch

**Sweet itch is one of the most common dermatological conditions seen in horses and can be difficult to control. It is caused by an allergic reaction to the saliva of biting Culicoides midges. The midges are found from March to October in the UK which is when most cases are seen and the midges are most active around dusk and dawn.**

### Clinical signs

- Persistent itching
- Horses can become irritable and restless
- Affected horses will kick and bite at themselves
- Persistent rubbing on objects in the environment results in hair loss and thickening of the skin
- Hair is frequently lost from the mane and the base of the tail which are classical sweet itch signs
- Inflammation and skin infection can result from persistent skin trauma



### Diagnosis

- Diagnosis is often based on the clinical signs. However, confirmation of the diagnosis can be performed by intra-dermal skin testing where midge extracts are injected into the horse's skin to see whether there is a reaction.

### Treatment

Preventative measures to stop the midges biting are the best treatment for sweet itch however some therapies listed below can help to reduce the itching in the short term:

- Topical anti-itch shampoos that contain oatmeal can be useful

- Application of ice or cold water temporarily relieves itching
- Glucocorticoids (steroids) e.g. dexamethasone or prednisolone provide effective relief but are not ideal for long-term therapy
- Unfortunately anti-histamines are rarely effective

### Prevention is better than cure!

- Apply fly masks and rugs
- Use insect repellents on the horse's body and rugs- pyrethroid or permethrin-containing products are generally the most effective
- Cattle ear tags containing pyrethroids can be effective and tied into the mane and tail
- Stable around dawn and dusk
- Fit ultrafine netting (regular mosquito nets are not fine enough) over stable doors and windows
- Install fans within stables (midges are very weak fliers)
- Turn out into open windswept fields if possible
- Turn-out more than half a mile from still water where midges breed and away from woods, trees and high hedges where midges gather



## We'd really value your support

Communities For Hoses works tirelessly to improve the welfare of horses through working closely with their owners to educate and support them.

We believe that prevention is better than cure and that through education we can achieve better outcomes for horses and their owners.

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- Run our education programmes

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