

Allergic Skin Disease

An allergic reaction is the excessive response of an individual's immune system to something that would be relatively harmless to most animals of the same species. The 'allergen' is the substance causing the reaction.

The most common example in horses is sweet itch, but allergies can also be caused by a number of other factors. Diagnosis of the cause can be difficult, making prevention tricky.



Clinical signs:

- **urticaria** - wheals in the skin;
- **inflamed skin** - reddened painful skin;
- **itchiness** - this may be anywhere on the body but the neck, flanks and rump are the most commonly affected.

Causes of skin allergies:

- **contact** - direct skin contact with the allergen, such as a rug, type of bedding, certain plants, etc.;
- **inhalation** - breathing in of the allergen, similar to hayfever in humans;
- **food** - allergy to type of feed that is eaten;
- **insect bite hypersensitivity** - midges are the most common cause (sweet itch) but other insects can also cause allergies;
- **drug reactions** - abnormal reactions to medicines are uncommon but do occur.



KEY POINTS

- Allergic skin conditions may result in lumps, itchiness or reddened inflamed skin.
- There are a wide variety of causes.
- Intradermal skin testing can help to ascertain the cause.
- Treatment involves management of the symptoms unless the cause is known and can be removed.

Treatment

The timing and progression of the disease can help your vet to determine a cause. It may be useful to keep a diary noting down at what time of year your horse is affected, weather conditions, feed/bedding changes, type of detergent used on rugs, etc.

Your vet may be able to recognise an allergy on examination of your horse but sometimes other tests are required. These could include skin scrapes and hair plucks to exclude other causes of disease. A skin biopsy can often provide a definitive diagnosis of an allergy, but it will not be able to identify the cause.

Intradermal skin testing has been developed for use in horses in order to help to identify the allergen, and will be available at most referral veterinary centres. Blood tests are also commercially available, but they are thought to be much less accurate than skin testing.



INTRADERMAL SKIN TESTING

Treatment

- Obviously it will help to remove the source of the allergy, but this can be impossible if the allergen cannot be identified.
- Your vet may wish to prescribe antibiotics if secondary bacterial skin infection is present.
- Antihistamine tablets are available for use in horses but they are less effective than in dogs and humans.
- Corticosteroids are usually very effective but must be used with caution as they carry a small risk of laminitis in some horses. Short courses may be very useful, though, and are relatively safe in most cases.
- Creams, gels and ointments may help to soothe the skin – ask your vet for advice.

PREVENTION

Prevention relies primarily on avoidance of the cause of the allergy:

- contact allergies - try changing detergent type or bedding;
- inhalational allergies - soaking hay may help in a few cases, but often the allergen is in the atmosphere outside and so cannot be avoided without moving premises;
- feed trials - feed one type of a feed at a time for two weeks each and observe if there is any improvement in the allergy;
- insect bite hypersensitivity - optimise fly control – see Sweet Itch factsheet;
- drug reactions - avoid further use of that particular medicine.



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