

# EQUINE NEWSLETTER

March 2021

## Mud Fever and Sweet Itch

What causes mud fever?

Mud fever is very similar to rain scald caused by the horse's skin becoming softer due to wet weather and muddy fields leading to prolonged wetting of their hair, enabling the bacteria *Dermatophilosis congolensis* to infect the skin. Secondary infections can then also develop caused by different bacteria. The skin barrier can also be broken down by other factors including trauma, UV damage from sunlight, mites, liver disease and sarcoids. So, if you are having a problem with mud fever it may be worth us checking your horse in case something else is the cause.

How do I prevent it?

Try to prevent your horse standing in mud for long periods of time. If possible, fence off the muddiest parts of the field or lay down shavings, wood chip or field mats. Try to regularly rotate what paddocks your horse is in to prevent the fields becoming poached. Don't wash your horse's legs off every time they come in, instead brush the mud off their legs. If your horse is itching their legs before the wet weather has set in it is important to identify and treat the cause.

What do I do if I suspect my horse has mud fever?

It is important once a horse has mud fever to try and keep their legs dry and clean. It is likely to be necessary to clip around the affected lesions and remove the horse's feathers. This is so that we can access the lesions to treat them. You then need to soak the scabs to try to remove them and apply an antibacterial cream to the lesions. We have a cream in the practice that we make specifically to treat mud fever. It is very important that you remove these scabs to enable the condition to resolve. If your horse's lesions are very bad or your horse is particularly sensitive, it may be advisable to sedate your horse to ensure the area is cleaned well. If the skin becomes very inflamed your horse can develop a cellulitis so may require systemic antibiotics. If your horse's legs are swollen it is also advisable to keep them moving each day either by being walked in hand or if possible, going on a walker. If your horse's legs become uncomfortable, they will need some sort of pain relief. Your horse can become quite lame with mud fever so they may need time off work. Mud fever can take time to heal so it is important to be patient and allow your horse's legs to heal and not turn them out too soon.



Can horses get mud fever multiple times?

Horses do not develop an immunity to the bacteria so can develop it again.

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# Sweet itch

What is sweet itch?

Sweet itch is an allergic reaction to midge bites, causing the horse or pony to feel itchy. It is most common from March through to October and many affected animals will show no clinical signs during winter months. Affected animals will commonly itch more around their mane, tail and head but can itch all over. This itching can result in loss of mane and tail, areas of baldness, wounds and skin infections. The horses may damage stables and fencing in their determination to itch. Sweet itch can have a big impact on a horse's quality of life.

When do horses develop sweet itch?

Horses typically develop sweet itch as youngsters between the ages of 1 and 5 years old. Unfortunately, the condition can worsen with age.

How can you diagnose sweet itch?

Diagnosis is usually made on clinical signs but can be confirmed with allergen testing.



How can you prevent sweet itch?

Traditionally the key factor to prevent horses with sweet itch is prevention; preventing the midges being able to bite the horse. This is achieved usually with sweet itch rugs, avoiding turning out during the peak midge times, dusk and dawn. Fly repellents containing permethrin or pyrethroid can also be used. It is important with sweet itch to prevent the horse becoming itchy and to stop the cycle starting. Some horses may require the use of anti-itch shampoos or medications, such as antihistamines or steroids, to keep their sweet itch under control. There is some suggestion that feeding omega oils can aid skin health thus helping sweet itch.

What else can we do for sweet itch?

You can also vaccinate for sweet itch. Last year 80% of our clients who used the vaccination found noticeable improvement in their sweet itch horses, with 50% finding a very significant improvement. The practice is now offering a sweet itch vaccination to try to help these itchy horses. The vaccination is a relatively new development but there are some promising studies into its effectiveness. The vaccination involves two injections a fortnight apart, ideally before the onset of any clinical signs. We recommend injecting before the fly population increases. The vaccine works by blocking the release of histamine thus preventing the itch/scratch cycle from the outset. Depending on your horse's response to the vaccine a third vaccination can then be given later in the season. If you are interested in vaccinating your horse against sweet itch please call the practice for more information

## Equine News

There is currently an outbreak of equine influenza in Somerset. We strongly recommend all our clients follow good biosecurity measures including isolating new horses on arrival for two weeks and vaccinating all their horses for flu. Please ring the practice if you have any questions flu or if your horse is showing any signs of flu such as coughing, nasal discharge, inappetence or being quieter in themselves.

Following last year's success with both frozen and chilled Artificial Insemination, Summerleaze is now a BEVA Approved AI Practice. For more information please contact the practice on 01297 304007

Thank you to all those who attended our webinar on managing respiratory conditions. We hope you enjoyed it. In the future we may be able to put on some similar events, so please feedback to us what you would be interested in hearing about.