



VET NOTES

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Sweet Itch – “*Culicoides* Hypersensitivity” Allison Howard, DVM



Ally was born and raised in Versailles, Kentucky, a small town on the outskirts of Lexington. Her father relocated to central Kentucky in the late 1980's, where he practiced equine veterinary medicine for over two decades. She began riding at an early age and eventually joined the Keeneland chapter of the United States Pony Club. During this time she fell in love with the sport of eventing, riding aside and fox hunting.

Dr. Howard attended the University of Kentucky for her undergraduate degree and received her bachelor of science in Biology. She then moved to Auburn, AL in 2012 to become part of the 2016 class at Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine.

After graduating in May 2016 and she moved back to Lexington, KY to start an equine surgical internship at Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital. She joined Peterson & Smith in June 2017 for an Ambulatory Internship and she will be staying as an associate Veterinarian in July 2018.

As the warmer months approach, so does the allergy season. Florida's many horses may face the coming season with symptoms such as incessant scratching, broken hair, hair loss, scaly irritated skin, or even secondary bacterial infections with oozing sores. The most likely culprit is the tiny *Culicoides* midge whose other aliases include gnats, no-see-ums, and punkies. These tiny insects are prone to swarming around the head, neck, belly and tails of horses, and can be relentless in their biting. While the biting itself is annoying, the main issue is the allergic reaction most horses have to the saliva of the insects, causing the intense itching, or pruritis. Horses will use fixed objects such as trees or fence posts to scratch. Particularly talented individuals may straddle automatic waterers or dog-sit to scratch their bellies.

Reducing exposure to the midges is crucial in order to keep horses comfortable in the coming season, but once a reaction has started, treatment goals include controlling the itchiness, keeping the horse comfortable, and treating any secondary bacterial infections.

There are several steps to decrease *Culicoides* populations on and around your property:

Repellents: Most fly sprays are actually insecticides and not true repellents. Permethrin and synthetic

cypermethrins are true repellent compounds and can be found in certain fly sprays. Liberal use of low concentration Permethrin (2%) sprays can be used on a daily basis and spot-on high concentration (44-64%) formulas can be used in problem areas once a week. Aggressive use of fly repellents on your horse and around your property is vital to preventing fly bites.

Control the environment: Midges are more active around areas of standing water. Removing stagnant water helps decrease breeding areas available for many other species of insects too, including mosquitos.

Fans and Stabling: Culicoides are most active around dawn and dusk and are not strong fliers. Keep affected horses stabled during peak insect hours. Adding stall fans can create a breeze that midges will be unable to fly in.

Barriers: Fly sheets and masks that cover the most commonly affected areas (crest, belly, and tail-head) can act as a physical barrier to prevent flies and midges from biting the animal.

Nutrition: Many owners and veterinarians believe that fatty acid supplementation helps decrease a horse's inflammatory reaction to the insect bites, namely, decreasing itchiness and inflammation.

Symptomatic Control:

Permethrin repellants, corticosteroids and sometimes antimicrobials for secondary infections are the main treatments used to control Culicoides hypersensitivity or "sweet itch". Corticosteroids can be applied in a topical cream, shampoo, or as an oral or injectable medication. Antimicrobials can be applied in shampoos, such as chlorhexidine or benzoyl peroxide-based products. Occasionally systemic antibiotics need to be prescribed as secondary infections can add to the itch severity a horse is experiencing. Working closely together, you and your veterinarian can develop a plan that works best for you and your horse.

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