

The Itchy Horse

We are already well into the midge season, and a horse stood rubbing it's mane and tail or nibbling various body parts is a sight all too common. This usually starts mid-April and continues to November. The worst time of day for midges is dusk and dawn, when the females need a blood meal to produce and lay their eggs.

The reasons a horse may be itchy can be broken down into contagious and non-contagious causes. Contagious problems include bacterial infection (rain scald, mud fever, folliculitis), fungal infections (ringworm), parasites (mites, lice, some types of worms) and viruses. Non-contagious problems include immune-mediated disease, allergies, irritant contact dermatitis, and some types of parasite, such as fleas, flies and stinging insects. In rare cases, a problem elsewhere in the body may cause skin lesions, for example in severe liver disease.



If the problem is non-responsive to medical treatments, very severe or recurrent, it is important to carry out testing to try and establish the reason for itching. Samples will be taken to examine under a microscope, and may include plucks of hair, skin scrapes, or sticky tape strips. If there is suspicion of ringworm, samples for fungal culture should be taken to confirm the diagnosis.

Treatment often involves a combination of medical therapy and management approaches, and different treatments will be needed to suit individual conditions. Medical treatments will commonly include killing parasites, with a course of 2 injections given 3 weeks apart. Topical shampoos can be used to soothe the skin, and treat any concurrent bacterial/fungal infections, possibly with the addition of oral anti-biotic. In severe cases, drugs such as steroids may be required to help prevent the itching and make the horse more comfortable. Feed supplements such as Cavalesse can be useful; although to be effective, treatment should start early in the year before symptoms develop. Anti-histamines, such as Piriton, work well in some cases.

Adjustments to management are equally important as medical treatments. The use of fly rugs/masks are generally recommended to act as a barrier to insects. Animals should ideally be stabled during high-risk times (dawn and dusk), and fly screens fitted to the stable door can help. If this is not possible, keep the animals away from standing water sources and trees. Oily topical solutions can be useful for the skin (flies don't like biting through citronella oil), and other insect repellents should be applied (e.g. solutions containing citronella, deet or benzyl benzoate.) Whatever you use, remember to carry out a patch test first, to ensure your horse doesn't react to a particular ingredient.



If you have an itchy horse that you would like to discuss, please don't hesitate to give us a call.