

Summer Ailments

Sunburn

Light coloured horses often have pink skin which can be affected by UVA and UVB rays from the sun more than in dark coloured horses. This is because the skin contains the pigment melanin, which helps protect it from the sun. Horses with white patches on their face, muzzle or ears can be affected and it is usually worse during the summer than the winter, but don't forget the UV rays can penetrate through cloud so even on cloudy days they need protection. It is advisable to protect your horses skin in some way; either by stabling during the day, applying sunscreen (either a special one for horses or a hypo-allergenic one for children), or a fly mask as these often come with both ear and muzzle protection. Just ensure the fly mask has UV protection. Pale skin is more at risk of certain types of skin cancer such as squamous cell carcinoma, these are often seen around the eyes and muzzle.

Photosensitisation

Pink skin is also more likely to be affected if horse develops an abnormal heightened reaction to UV light, known as photosensitisation. It can affect any unpigmented skin on the legs or muzzle. The skin can swell and sometimes crusting or oozing of serum is seen. The areas are often itchy. It can be caused by exposure to some plant species including rape, alfalfa and some clovers, liver problems or recent drug therapy with certain antibiotics. A full history, clinical signs and sometimes a blood sample or liver biopsy is needed for accurate diagnosis. Treatment can involve stabling so they are out of sunlight, restricted access to grazing, steroids and antibiotic creams.

Sweet itch

Some horses have a hypersensitivity to the saliva when bitten by certain flies and midges. It is usually *culicoides* species which are responsible for causing the intensely itchy skin irritation. In temperate areas there is a seasonal occurrence during the summer months but it can occur at any time. The itchy spots are usually seen at the tail head and along the base of the mane, the hair is usually rubbed away and the skin is damaged. The best treatment involves restricting the access of the flies, as if they cannot bite the hypersensitivity reaction does not occur. For severe itching steroids can sometimes be utilised but there is a risk of laminitis, especially with repeated use. Topical application of benzyl benzoate mixed with oil can help repel the flies to stop them biting as they cannot land on the area as easily due to the oil. Various types of fly rug are available but for sweet itch it is important to choose a rug which is snug fitting so the flies cannot get underneath. Fencing off ponds and streams will also help by limiting the number of flies in the location. There is a vaccine currently in the trial stage, which may be available next year.

Summer Pasture Associated Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

This is similar disease to RAO (Recurrent Airway Obstruction) but it occurs during the summer months, usually affecting horses out at grass. It is thought to be caused by hypersensitivity to environmental allergens including pollen, which affects the lungs. The clinical signs can include difficulty breathing, reluctance to exercise, weight loss and not eating. The start of the clinical signs can correlate with local fields flowering and high pollen counts. Diagnosis is based on the clinical signs, history and resolution of signs with treatment. Treatment options involve the use of bronchodilators such as Ventipulmin and steroids. The steroids are usually administered directly to the lungs using an inhaler and a nebuliser, which most horses tolerate surprisingly well.