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25 July 2010: 25-year-old Shetland Jacko had suffered with sweet itch for 20 years. He had sores and bald patches



20 September 2010: After two months of being given Think Itch, Jacko's sores had completely healed and his hair nearly all grown back



In July Jacko had an itchy tail with sores and bald patches from rubbing



By September he had excellent hair growth and his skin was calmer

Latest advice for sweet itch sufferers

With a veterinary cure unlikely in the immediate future, caring for a sweet itch sufferer can be costly, both in emotionally and financially. Hermione Perry MSc, from Brinicombe Equine, discusses the latest nutritional support

SWEET itch, or summer seasonal recurrent dermatitis, is an allergy to midge bites, particularly the *Culicoides* midge, and research suggests up to 50,000 horses in the UK may suffer.

The female midge needs a blood meal in order to mature her eggs. When she bites she injects saliva, which acts as an anti-coagulant — allowing her to feed more efficiently.

Research is ongoing, but it appears some horses' immune systems overreact to the bite, causing inflammation and the release of chemicals, triggering an allergic reaction. During a humid evening in the peak of summer a horse may be bitten hundreds of times, with each midge feeding for up to 20 minutes.

It is not known why some horses are affected, or why a horse can develop symptoms later in life. But it does appear that

native types are more prone to sweet itch than thoroughbreds and certain trends suggest there could be a genetic influence.

It also seems that horses imported into the UK could be more prone to a midge allergy as they have no resistance to the UK flies when they arrive. This is also common across the globe, for example in Icelandic horses that are exported to Denmark from their native habitat where there are no midges.

The nutritional approach

BRINICOMBE Equine, which is well-known for the fly deterrent Think Fly, has launched Think Itch. This new feed supplement offers a different approach — helping to deter midges while supporting a healthy immune system.

In Think Itch the natural fly-detering properties of Think Fly have been combined

with a complex array of ingredients to help maintain immune balance and healthy skin. Trace element chelates, essential fatty acids, isoflavonoids and vitamins, including A, C and E, support the body's production of antioxidants. Zinc and methylsulphonylmethane (MSM) support hair growth and healthy skin, and nicotinamide (vitamin B3) aids the production of histamine and may help to calm the allergic response.

Think Itch contains Brinicombe's best-selling Think Fly formula, a natural feed supplement containing 14 different herbs and spices which, when eaten, helps to deter biting flies. This formula, which is backed by six years of customer feedback, arrived on the equine market after huge success in the ruminant industry, as fly nuisance can have a significant impact on growth rates of livestock.

Feed trials results

WHEN Brinicombe Equine asked for owners to trial Think Itch in 2010, Claire Daniels volunteered. "Jacko has had sweet itch since he was gelded at five years old. Now, aged 25, I thought I had tried everything," she said.

"He rubs until sore and has hair loss during the summer. But after a month of feeding Think Itch his bald patches looked less angry. Two months later I was really impressed and the difference was obvious. His coat was more glossy and there was significant hair growth, which doesn't normally happen until November. After all these years I was expecting part of the problem to be habitual, but Think Itch has given me new hope."

Tracy Harris from Devon also trialled Think Itch. She has two ponies and decided to feed only one Think Itch to compare the results.

"As the summer progressed Bonnie developed a bald tail and sores on her neck from rubbing," said Tracy.

"Black Jack, who received Think Itch, kept a thick mane and tail for the first time in years, suggesting he was hardly rubbing at all. You would never have known that he is allergic to midges — I am amazed at his condition."



Management tips — what to consider

► Try stabling horses during dusk and dawn as this is the time when midges tend to be most active. However, putting your horse in its stable will provide it with plenty of convenient walls to rub on, which could ultimately cause more problems than leaving it outside.

► Avoid fields with damp and boggy ground and a close proximity to water, as this is where midges tend to congregate.

► Choose high ground with a good breeze if possible, as midges prefer shelter.

► When using fly rugs or sweet itch blankets take care to avoid those made of abrasive material which could worsen the effects of rubbing. Consider your field environment and the likelihood of your horse ripping a £200 investment. A good fit is essential but there will always be areas left exposed to the midges.

► Fly sprays, particularly those containing DEET or pyrethrins are most frequently recommended,

but the results achieved can often be disappointing. There are a number of disadvantages with topical fly repellents — they are not long-lasting so must be re-applied every few hours, their effects will wash away after rain, some horses can be sensitive to the ingredients, while others can dislike being sprayed.

► Using oils, greases and creams. Oil-based products can act as a midge barrier, but they can be messy and may cause the skin to burn in hot, sunny weather. Soothing creams can be beneficial to areas that are already affected.

► Consider carefully before using steroids and antihistamines on your horse.

Corticosteroids will offer short-term relief, but are not suitable long-term and have been linked to an increased risk of laminitis. The alternative antihistamines are also not generally recommended long-term and, as with humans, they can cause drowsiness.



► For more information please contact Brinicombe Equine. Tel: 08700 606206 or visit: www.brinicombe-equine.co.uk