

The more you know about allergies, the more you can minimise reactions and improve your horse's wellbeing

Stay allergy aware

Words:
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Just like us, our horses can be allergic to a range of things, and this can develop at any point in their lives, usually after repeated exposure to an allergen, which can cause their immune system to overreact.

Allergens can include:

- Mould and fungi
- Dust
- Plants and pollen
- Biting insects
- Food or supplements
- Some medications
- Direct contact.

Horses are exposed to many of these daily, in the stables, during exercise or out at pasture.

Spot the signs

The two main types of allergies for horses are skin reactions and reactions affecting the lungs, nose and windpipe. Your horse can also develop conditions because of an allergy, such as Equine Asthma, sweet itch or hives.

Common reactions can include:

- Hair loss and crusty skin
- Hives
- Swelling and redness
- Coughing and laboured breathing
- Headshaking (caused by some seasonal allergies).

Skin reactions

Equine dermatitis (inflammation of the skin) is a skin condition caused by factors such as allergies, insects or environmental irritants being inhaled or coming into contact with your horse's skin. Some of the most common types include:

- Atopic dermatitis
- Bacterial dermatitis (mud fever/rain scald)
- Insect bite hypersensitivity (sweet itch)
- Reactions affecting the lungs, nose and windpipe.

Zooming in on sweet itch

Sweet itch is an allergic reaction to the protein in the saliva of biting midges (*Culicoides*) but may include other blood-sucking flies and insects. The allergy creates an irritable and sore skin condition (dermatitis), affecting the mane and tail areas of your horse, where midges typically bite.

Your horse is most likely to be affected between March and November, when biting insects are most active because of the warm temperatures and humidity.

Think **ITCH**: Inflamed sores, Thickened and coarse skin, Change in behaviour and Hair loss.

There's currently no cure; it's a condition that needs careful management as it recurs yearly. Reducing the possibility of contact between midges and your horse is the most

effective way to manage it. This can be achieved by using protective coverings such as fly rugs or masks, avoiding areas that attract midges or sheltering your horse from dusk until after dawn. A vet may be able to recommend medication to ease symptoms.

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Talk to your vet to see what would work best for you and your four-legged friend

Highlighting equine asthma (EA)

Airborne particles are small enough to enter your horse's respiratory tract and cause irritation. These are known as aeroallergens and can be increased through poor management practices, such as inappropriate choice of bedding material or insufficient ventilation.

Aeroallergens may include various types of dust, mould, bacteria, mites, plant debris, pollen and toxic gases such as ammonia.

Signs:

- Coughing
- Difficulty breathing at rest
- Nasal discharge
- Fatigue
- Loss of performance
- Exercise intolerance.

If your horse is displaying signs of EA, it's important to speak to your vet for further advice. There are diagnostic tools available which can give a high level of accuracy in determining the affected area. These tools are also useful for monitoring response to treatment.

Corticosteroids are often used in the treatment of EA. These are anti-inflammatory drugs and must be administered by your vet either orally, intravenously or via the respiratory tract. Additionally, your vet may advise using medication as a 'rescue treatment' prior to corticosteroids to open (dilate) the airway and give rapid relief. The effects of these medications are short-lived (up to 12 hours), so they should be used

alongside good management to reduce aeroallergens and prevent further irritation.

Diagnosing allergies

If you're concerned, contact your vet. To confirm the allergy, your vet may recommend two tests.

Restriction tests are where potential allergens can be removed. For this, potential triggers such as bedding type or certain feeds are removed under vet guidance. If your horse improves after removing a potential trigger, it can help indicate the allergen.

Intradermal testing (IDT) is where potential allergens are injected into the skin. This usually involves clipping an area on your horse's neck before injecting small amounts of an allergen (in liquid form) and then recording if there's a reaction. Horses that are sensitive to an allergen will show stronger reactions such as swelling and hives in the area where they were injected. This lets identified allergies be used in immunotherapy or other treatment plans.

Management and treatment

This depends on the specific cause of the reaction, but generally limiting your horse's contact with the allergen can reduce their reaction without treatment. Although difficult, avoiding the allergen is key to improving your horse's welfare.

There are a variety of other treatment options available:

- **Changes to management** by using quality bedding, washing rugs and saddle pads can reduce dust mites. Mucking out and sweeping when your horse is away from the area, carrying out feed checks and maintaining turnout during winter will also benefit your horse.
- **Allergen-specific immunotherapy** involves feeding or injecting small amounts of an allergen to the affected horse, increasing the amount each time. Using the feeding method daily is easier and seems to be as efficient as the injections, which must be given by a vet. It helps to improve your horse's tolerance to the allergen and reduce symptoms, however, it takes several months to see results.
- **Antihistamines** provide a non-steroidal option that can be used long-term (under vet supervision). It blocks histamine, a chemical in the body that triggers an immune response, to reduce the severity of allergic reactions.

Horses wearing protective coverings when turned out



- **Anti-inflammatory immunosuppressant drugs** (often corticosteroids) are proven effective in controlling itching and hives. They're given daily until symptoms reduce and then the dose is gradually decreased to help keep your horse reaction-free.
- **Grooming and bathing** with soothing shampoos can help you monitor the condition of your horse's skin. Products containing aloe vera and oatmeal can also be beneficial alongside regular grooming to remove dust and dirt from the coat.

Talk to your vet to see what would work best for you and your four-legged friend.

Get in touch – we're here to help

Our Horse Care and Welfare team are here to help and can offer you further advice with any questions you may have. Contact us on 02476 840517* or email welfare@bhs.org.uk. You can also get in touch with us via our social media channels.

Opening times are 8.35am–5pm from Monday–Thursday and 8.35am–3pm on Friday.
*Calls may be recorded for monitoring purposes.

Written in partnership with Nottingham Trent University.



Remember ACT

- **Assess:** Contact with allergens such as pollen, dust and mould should be avoided.
- **Control:** Midges/insects are hard to avoid. Repellent sprays, fly rugs/masks and nose nets can help.
- **Treat:** Contact your vet if you have concerns. Allergies can't be treated, but medications can help manage the symptoms.