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fourwaysequine Blog

Summer's little irritations



Fly control for the Summertime - why should it be a priority?

Even though Summer is a time for relaxing by the pool and enjoying the longer days, the warm weather brings with its own set of problems for horses and their owners.

The warm rainy weather creates the perfect environment for a population explosion of pesky flies and midges which cause a variety of frustrating disorders of the skin. These will be discussed briefly below:

INSECT HYPERSENSITIVITY "SWEET ITCH"

This is one of the most common skin disorders affecting horses. Amongst other insects, the most common offenders are stable and house flies, mosquitoes and midges (*Culicoides* spp.).

Horses become hypersensitised to the saliva from the bites of these insects and this is what causes the clinical signs seen. Certain breeds, most notably the cold-blooded horses, seem to be more affected. Horses with sweet itch show moderate to intense itchiness (pruritis) as well as patchy areas of hair loss (alopecia). The affected skin often becomes thickened and



scaly. Areas most commonly affected are the face and neck, chest, underbelly, legs and tailhead. The distribution of these areas will depend on where the insect involved preferentially bites. Diagnosis of this condition is based on history (seasonal occurrence) and clinical signs. Skin biopsies of affected areas can aid in a diagnosis.

Treatment is based mainly on eliminating exposure to the biting insects – this is achieved by applying fly repellent to the horses, using “bug-rugs”/fly sheets, having fans on in the stables, stabling horses from pre-dusk until after dawn and keeping biting insect populations down through environmental management, (limiting the amount of organic material which is around the stables e.g. manure, eliminating standing water).

Horses will often need to go on a carefully planned and monitored course of systemic corticosteroids which will be tailored by your veterinarian. This is useful to break the cycle of itchiness which is set up. Sometimes horses will require a medicated shampoo in order to control any secondary infection which may have started due to the constant traumatising of the skin.

ONCHOCERCIASIS

This disease is caused by a parasite known as *Onchocerca cervicalis* which is transmitted to horses via the bites of midges and other biting insects. The onchocerca organism lives in the ligament of the horses neck (the Ligamentum nuchae) and when the adult organisms produce microfilariae, these migrate to the skin of the face, neck and underbelly. Clinical signs are due to hypersensitivity to the microfilariae and cause signs such as thinning hair coat in these regions, areas of hair loss, scaling of affected areas and skin thickening. Where the lesions occurred, the hair will often grow back white (a condition known as leukoderma). Diagnosis of this disease is made through biopsies of affected skin areas whereupon the microfilariae can be visualised. Treatment is through a thorough deworming program with an Ivermectin-based product – this does not cure the problem and as such will need to be repeated when clinical signs flare up. Fly control can help prevent the initial infestation from occurring.



HABRONEMIASIS ("SUMMER SORES")

House flies and stable flies can transmit a nematode disease caused by members of the *Habronema* spp. family. Larvae are passed from the insect hosts into moist skin areas or open skin wounds and these form ulcerated nodules – most commonly around the eyes, penis and prepuce or any area of traumatised skin. Clinical signs, as well as biopsy and impression smears of affected wounds, are frequently used to diagnose this disorder. Treatment is done by dosing the horse with an appropriate Ivermectin-based product and a specially formulated topical Ivermectin product. The use of fly masks is also recommended to prevent the ocular form of this

disease.



Good stable management including keeping stables free of manure, is an under-valued means of controlling this disease, since larvae passed out through the droppings can be transferred by flies to other horses.

BOTS

Bots are a well known problem in the horse world. The offending flies (*Gasterophilus* spp.) lay their eggs on the legs and bellies of horses. The eggs and larvae are taken into the mouth (through licking or scratching of the affected areas) where-after the larvae move (after being embedded in the mucosa of the tongue and mouth) through to the stomach. The larvae then attach in the stomach and take on the characteristic appearance of red bots. Bots are generally considered to be more of a nuisance than causing real disease, however if there are a large number they can cause a stomatitis (inflammation of the mouth) and/or a gastritis (inflammation of the stomach). Treatment includes deworming with an Ivermectin containing product at the end of bot season, (Summer into Autumn) as well as removing bot eggs off the body. Use of repellents helps limit, or prevent, the fly from laying eggs.

VIRAL DISEASES

Two vector-borne viral diseases of horses which are very important to take cognisance of are African Horse Sickness Virus (AHSV) and West Nile Virus (WNV). AHSV is transmitted by *Culicoides* midges and West Nile by mosquitoes. The use of insect repellents is therefore one of the primary tools a horse owner has as an aid to preventing the transmission of these diseases, along with fly control and environmental management.

Recent trials, performed by Dr Patrick Page at Onderstepoort, show that a repellent product containing DEET (Diethyltoliamide) is most effective against the *Culicoides* midge, as compared to products containing Cypermethrin or Citronella

With any repellent it is important to apply it when the skin is clean and dry. As with humans, horses are differently sensitive to a variety of products and before liberally applying the repellents, a "spot-test" should be performed on a small patch of skin to see whether the horse reacts or not. This is done by choosing a patch of skin and applying the product locally within that area. This area is then observed for 72 hours to check for any signs of skin irritation (such as swelling, redness, hair loss etc.)

If you need any further information or advice, please contact **Fourways Equine Clinic on 011 468 3393** and one of our veterinarians will be happy to help you.

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