

ITCH & SCRATCH

When we get an itch – we scratch. Our equines do exactly the same except they use their teeth to nibble, hooves to scratch and also rub against anything that is close by. It is easier to rub a neck / mane and a rump/tail than the flank hence Manes and Tails are commonly the first areas to suffer the itch / scratch cycle : when a horse itches it scratches and because it scratches it itches so the cycle repeats itself. Just thinking about the subject makes me itch because the ‘threshold of irritation’ is lowered by the thought process. This also happens in horses when they are bothered by insects.

Skin can only respond to damage in a limited number of ways and long established cases often look very similar. Anything that irritates the skin can lead to itching:

Itching (pruritus) – twitching, tail swishing, rubbing, stamping or nibbling.

Hair loss (Alopecia) can be secondary to self trauma due to itching or to e.g. Ringworm where the hair shaft is weakened.

Exudation and crusting causing the hairs to matt together e.g. Mud Fever, other bacteria fungi or physical injuries.

Skin scaling or flaking – frequently a secondary sign of skin disease.

Skin swellings – can be from allergies, physical injury or even tumours.

Hair can lose pigment and become white either from previous skin injury (cuts and abrasions) or from immune disease. Skin can show an increase in pigmentation after prolonged inflammation.

Excessive hair growth can occur in cases of ‘Cushings Disease’

Accumulations of sweat, mud or irritant liquids. Long unkempt coats build up skin flakes and sweat leading to a secondary bacterial infection of the surface skin layers. I’ve seen this both in summer and winter and in horses affected by ‘Cushings Disease’. The best treatment is to clip the horse out and use an appropriate veterinary shampoo either with Chlorhexidine or occasionally Benzyl Peroxide depending upon the amount of exudates and scale.

Physical trauma from ill fitting or poorly maintained tack e.g. roughened edges or seams:

As horses change shape then rugs and tack need to be altered. This may seem very simple nevertheless the condition is seen every year.

Water logging of skin reduces the bonds between skin cells allowing easier access for bacteria:

The classic conditions are Mud Fever, Rainscald, Weatherbeat or Pastern Dermatitis. These are bacterial skin infections acting as opportunist pathogens colonising areas of

damaged skin, usually Dermatophilus (Mud Fever, Rainscald, Weatherbeat) or



Staphylococcus.

Irritation by insects – midges, flies, lice and ticks.

Sweet Itch is caused by an allergy to midge saliva and hence is seen in the summer months. Because the condition is an allergy then control is aimed at removing the horse from the midge. Graze between 10am – 4pm and stable with fly screens across the doors/ windows. Some all over body and head rugs are effective in control linked with insecticides/ repellent treatments. Ponies are more commonly affected than horses and it does have some heritability. Desensitization is a treatment possibility to reduce the severity of disease rather than eliminate it. Many Sweet Itch cases also have an increased sensitivity to flies.

Lice – more of a winter problem and can lead to acute cases of self trauma. They are easily seen with the naked eye measuring approx 0.5cm in length. They have a 10-21 day life cycle and are transmitted by direct contact.

Ticks – single bites can lead to large swellings! They can carry other diseases but at present this is uncommon.



Mites – usually Chorioptes species seen in feathered horses causing them to stamp feet and rub legs. Other mite species are found albeit rarely.

Fungal – Ringworm. Sometimes it can be itchy sometimes not. It doesn't always cause circular hairless patches either! Remember we can be affected by ringworm and it is very easily transmitted. Spores last many years within the buildings especially on wood.



Treatments are aimed at minimizing spore production and spread.

Allergy - Urticaria



Causes raised swellings that when pressed with a finger leave a 'pit' due to the oedema within the tissues. Urticaria can also cause hair loss and exudate which can allow secondary bacterial colonisation.

Oxyuris Equi a pinworm lays it's eggs around the anus and can cause tail rubbing. Rare now as modern wormers are very effective however some of the newer wormers are less effective than the older ones.

Autoimmune skin disease does occur as do many other conditions but the above are the common ones.

Skin disease in horses is a simple subject and yet due to the limited way skin can respond equine dermatology is always a challenge and commonly frustrating!

