What is Sweet Itch?

Sweet Itch is a skin disease which is caused by an allergy to the saliva of certain biting flies or midges, causing intense itching in the affected horse or pony. These animals will rub against trees, fencing, stable doors and walls or any other surface available. This condition occurs during the warmer months when the flies are breeding and active. The Sweet Itch season tends to be early spring to late autumn. Prevention is better (and easier) than cure. If you know your horse has Sweet Itch put preventative measures in place before the start of the midge season.

Be alert to the symptoms:

Rubbing of manes, forelock, ears, neck and withers, face, back and base of the tail, causing hair loss and, if severe, broken skin and sores. The skin can become thickened, dry, rough and hairless. Affected animals may become difficult to catch, handle or ride due to the severe discomfort caused by this condition.

Control and Treatment:

Effective management of affected animals is vital to the control of Sweet Itch.

- Affected horses should be stabled from dusk until dawn to reduce their exposure to the flies and midges. Stables can be made insect proof by using screens and insect repellent strips.
- Midge cannot fly if there is a breeze/wind so affected horses are best suited to open, breezy fields, so as to reduce the number of midges and the number of objects available to rub on.
- When turned out to graze specially designed lightweight fly rugs, hoods and face masks are essential to reduce the surface area of the horse that is exposed to the biting insects.
- Fly repellents, insecticide sprays or creams should be used, especially on the mane and tail, withers and head, as well as the midline and neck, particularly during exercise.
- Affected horses require strict management, daily grooming and application of fly repellents or insecticidal lotions, use of fly rugs and they should be stabled from dusk until dawn even if there are no visible symptoms of active Sweet Itch.
- Do not let greasy lotions build up on the affected areas, as this in itself can cause sweating and itching.
- Weather permitting, wash the affected areas with a mild shampoo regularly. Washing the fly rugs regularly is also beneficial, but it is best to have two rugs so that one is always available for use.
- The environment in which affected horses live is also important and can have an impact on Sweet Itch. Immature stages of these flies live in water so affected horses should not be in close proximity to standing water, ponds, streams or rivers.