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What makes 'em itch?

by Dr Barry Coates

An itchy horse is not only frustrating for the horse itself, but also for its owner, and the attending veterinarian. This article briefly covers the possible causes of equine pruritis (an itchy horse).

An itchy horse can be caused by two category possibilities: immune-mediated (allergic reaction) causes and parasitic causes. An immune-mediated cause of itchiness is as a result of the body's over-reaction to the stimulus, an example of this in humans would be a very itchy mosquito bite – we scratch for days after being bitten, not because of the physical biting or sucking action of the mozzie, but because of our body's over-reaction to the mosquito's saliva.

Insect-bite hypersensitivity

This is also known as Sweet Itch or Queensland Itch. It is by far the most common skin allergy in horses and probably the most common cause of pruritis of horses in Southern Africa.

The pruritis associated with biting insects is not due to surface irritancy, but a result of over-reaction of the horse's immune system to the insect's mouth parts and saliva. The itchiness can be intense and can become a raw "rash" within a few hours due to vigorous scratching and rubbing.

These rashes can occasionally become secondarily infected by bacteria or fungus. This principle applies to any intense itching that breaks the skin, and is not just associated with insect-bite hypersensitivities. The insects most commonly associated with insect-bite hypersensitivities are the *Culicoides spp* biting midges and the *Stomoxys spp* biting flies (read the February 2007 edition of *SA Horseman* for more details about these external parasites).

Where the lesions occur on the body depends on what insect is involved and where it likes to bite, but generally speaking the favoured sites are the face, neck, mane and tail. The symptoms are intense itching, localised

hair loss (rubbed out), scabs and rashes. The symptoms seem to get worse as the horse gets older. Insect-bite hypersensitivity can be prevented by stabling horses in insect-proof stables at night, using fly fringes or masks, and by applying a reputable insect repellent to the mane and tail in the late afternoon, at least once a day in the warmer times of the year.

The pruritis can be relieved by using certain corticosteroids which should only be administered by a veterinarian due to the relative high risk of side effects in horses.

Allergic contact dermatitis

This is also a very common cause of pruritis, mainly due to the fact that there are so many things that a horse can come into contact with that can cause an allergic reaction that then leads to very mild to very severe pruritis. Bedding, certain pollens and moulds, certain pastures or food, topical medicines or ointments, certain shampoos and insect repellents are all examples potential contact allergens.

Once again, depending on the cause, this determines where the itching and lesions start, but the legs and the under-side of the horse are commonly affected areas, the head and tail can also be affected. If the cause is chronic (present for a long time), the affected skin areas become thickened and hyperpigmented (skin darkens).

Intense pruritis can be controlled short-term by using veterinarian prescribed corticosteroids, but the key to alleviating the cause/s is by eliminating the possible causes one at a time. If, for example, you change the bedding, food and the shampoo all at once, you may not know what the actual cause of the allergy is. The principle by which certain parasites cause pruritis is by physical or mechanical irritation, and is not stimulated or mediated by the immune-system over-reacting. Some of the parasitic causes of pruritis include:

- **Tail pin worm (*Oxyuris equi*):** This is a common cause of an itchy tail and anus. The pruritis is caused by eggs that are laid

in the peri-anal (around the anus) area by the adult female worm. The tail rubbing and itching causes hair loss either side of the tail base and the hair near the top of the tail is ruffled. It is a condition that is most common among young horses and horses that are not dewormed regularly. Symptoms can be alleviated by using soapy water to wash away the eggs from the peri-anal area and the base of the tail. Regularly deworming is an effective way of preventing a pin worm infection.

- **Lice, mites and other biting flies:** Lice mainly affect longer haired animals in the winter and they mainly affect the trunk (flanks) of the body. Mites can affect any part of the body because there are many different types of mites, each having a preference for a different part of the body. Biting flies can also cause mechanical irritation and subsequent itching due to the bite itself inflicted.



The legs and the under-side of the horse are commonly affected areas

When trying to solve a case of “what makes ‘em itch?”, it is important to seek veterinary advice. The other important factor in getting to the bottom of the question, is information – what, when and why? Watch your horse closely to see where, or if in fact, your horse is itching. Reputable homeopathic remedies can also be tried to help in controlling the symptoms. SAH