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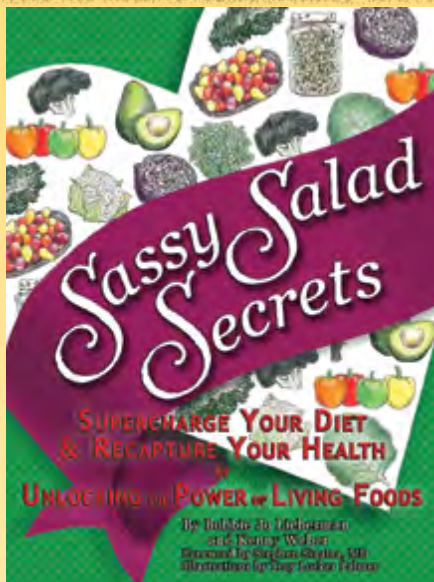
BY FRANK REILLY, DVM



When it comes to equine skin conditions,

does your horse become miserable in the heat and humidity of summer? Does he rub his mane and tail, even breaking the skin as he futilely tries to quell sweet itch? Break out in bumpy hives all over his body? Get itchy ears that look infected? Develop patches of crusty, painful rainrot over his back and hindquarters? Whether your horse has sweet itch or another allergic reaction to the biting bugs of summer, here's help from the inside out.

continued next page



a new eBook by the
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Bobbie Jo Lieberman

"From Busting Myths to Secrets everyone should know to delicious recipes, it's all there in an easy-to-read, understand and fun style! Want to grow your own sprouts? Bobbie will show you how. Want to make your own sauerkraut? Her recipe and method makes it so easy. Want to know the best and healthiest veggies, she's got a list. Think organic is too expensive, she'll explain why it's not ... as well as resources and links for you to keep on learning. As Bobbie Jo says, supercharge your diet and recapture your health. Friends, you should buy this book!"

—Gitty Up, Dutch Henry, author & "Heartbeats" columnist

"I love the inviting, conversational tone of this book. Bobbie's path to overcoming type II diabetes is remarkable, and her style makes this a book you can't put down. I have been struggling to find a way to cut way back on meat because the price we pay in damage to the environment is shocking to me. I am jumping for joy at the variety in these salads. When I awoke this morning at 5:35 a.m., I just had to get up and make a shopping list for my new ingredients. I am so excited!"

—Linda Tellington-Jones,
founder of Tellington TTouch

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Summer itch—is it a parasite or an allergy? One of my mares is constantly trying to itch her belly and is actually trying to reach the skin between her hind legs to the rear of her teats. What can I do to help?

Summer Itch (summer eczema) is also known as sweet itch or Queensland itch. Horses become itchy over the tailhead, mane, under the belly and between the back legs. Hairless, red, crusty areas emerge as they rub on trees/fences/stalls to the point of breaking off more hair until they have rubbed their skin raw, resulting in secondary infections seeded into the skin.

Sweet itch is the #1 reason for mane and tail rubbing in horses as well as the #1 hypersensitivity reaction in horses. The culprit is the tiny *Culicoides* gnat (aka nose-see-um, biting midge). Despite their diminutive stature, these gnats inflict painful bites leading to allergic reactions in certain horses to their saliva. This reaction creates itchy skin. There is a genetic component to summer eczema—most horses are not affected but if one has the condition, their sire or dam likely had it as well.

What happens after they bite? In most horses, you will see very little. The bite itself is small and the skin will heal. Due to genetics, some horses produce an over-the-top reaction to the saliva left from the female—certain cells in the bloodstream of the horse overproduce inflammatory reactions, leading to severe itching. The itching leads to horses rubbing hard on posts or walls, or even crawling over gravel when the itch is on the belly. This all leads to skin being damaged much more than just by the bite, and secondary bacterial infections may occur. Now your horse has an allergic *and* bacterial problem!

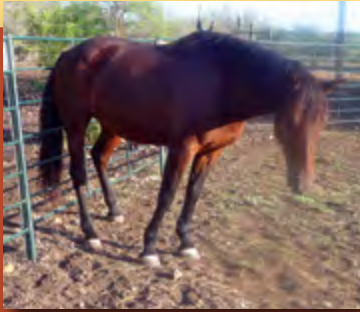
Summer eczema is not contagious to other horses. The gnats can fly up to one mile, so wet areas anywhere near your farm can "invite" these gnats to fly to your place. There are over 100 species of *Culicoides* in the US alone—a horse can be eczema-free in one state but when moved to another location, the horse may have problems. Most allergy shots are not helpful due to so many different species around.

Prevention involves diligently keeping your horse away from wet areas/swamps, creating a physical barrier with strong fly repellents, oral herbals, omega 3s (as from flax) to help skin recover, shampoos to remove crusty debris, fans to blow gnats away from your horse, nighttime stalling with fans due to the gnats feasting only at night. Screens are of no help—the gnats fly right through them. Some folks put a mesh "bug suit" on their horse from head to toe to try to protect the horse, but this can be stressful in hot weather.



ABOVE: The bite of the female *Culicoides* midge can cause a severe allergic reaction in horses, dogs and people, leading to a condition known as equine summer eczema or sweet itch. RIGHT: Horses with sweet itch often rub out their manes and tails, resulting in extreme hair loss.





This 12-year-old Morgan mare is allergic to the bites of *Culicoides* spp. and develops tiny, crusty bumps all over her lower legs every summer, a condition known as equine summer eczema or sweet itch. She rubs her mane, tail and hindquarters and becomes grumpy when the flies and gnats are biting. Photo by Bobbie Jo Weber



Bathe itchy horses frequently with a soothing shampoo with special attention to the mane and tail area, and allow the suds to soak into the skin for at least 10 minutes. Photo by Bobbie Jo Weber

Rainrot drives me crazy, especially when my horses are turned out and I decide I want to go riding. Rainrot washes/rinses seem to solve the problem, but is there something that will allow me to ride sooner? What is the best remedy for rainrot, and is there an easy way to prevent it?

Rainrot is caused by one or more bacterial infections in combination with fungal elements to create a breakdown in the skin barrier. Stress, weather extremes and underlying hormonal and immune problems can all add up to this condition taking hold. Test your horse's thyroid levels—many horses who are on the low end of normal benefit from thyroid powder.

Horses on dirt paddocks or in limited grazing situations may have low vitamin E levels. Add 5,000 iu vitamin E daily to support the immune system. Omega 3s from flax, fish oil, hemp oil or chia can help with barrier recovery. Oral antibiotics may be required and will be needed at least two weeks in a row to have an effect. Giving your horse a bath two to three times per week to help remove debris is often helpful. Sunlight is therapeutic,

continued next page

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A final application of the fly spray of your choice will help ward off biting pests. Photo by Bobbie Jo Weber

“Prevention involves diligently keeping your horse away from wet areas/swamps, creating a physical barrier with strong fly repellents, oral herbals, omega 3s (as from flax) to help skin recover, shampoos to remove crusty debris, fans to blow gnats away from your horse, nighttime stalling with fans due to the gnats feasting only at night.”

so when it's sunny, take off any blankets. Topical creams have little effect on thick mats of scabs. Keeping the horse on good pasture is helpful, as fresh grass has many nutrients to help solve the situation.

How can I eliminate the cause and treat tail rubbing?

The two main causes of tail rubbing in horses are parasitism and allergic reactions to insect bites. Parasitism occurs when female adult pinworms lay eggs around the anus of the horse, creating an extreme itch. Pinworms are easily controlled by deworming the horse with an ivermectin, Moxidectin or pyrantel-based dewormer.

Insects can also create itching from bites and from the allergic reactions of saliva embedded into the skin from the bite. Flies and gnats (*Culicoides*) are the most common problems, with lice, ticks and mange being less common. Topical repellents applied two times a day help provide a barrier for the area.

The inner ear lining of my mare is covered in various sized white, denuded, raised spots, and some black, denuded, raised spots. I've tried anti-fungal cream for weeks, without results. Then I had to wipe out the accumulated dirt and cream buildup. When I scraped with my thumbnail, the horse did not like it. The vet thinks it may be scarring from fly bites. What do you think?

There are three main scenarios involving horses' ears that call for a veterinary examination:

- ▶ **Insect origin**—clusters of ticks or bloody, caked, tarry blood from black fly bites. Your doctor will remove the ticks and clean out the ears of any debris from black flies. Gently work fly repellent over the outside and inside the ears daily to avoid the problem from recurring.
- ▶ **Aural plaques**—Papilloma virus creates white, raised areas that crust up. If you pick at it, you will see pink skin underneath, and, if removed, the plaques will come back. The virus is introduced into the ear by flies. There is no cure for these, but they are benign.
- ▶ **Sarcoids**—your veterinarian may biopsy the growth to see if this is the problem. These can grow quickly, get bloody and be contagious to other parts of the horse's body or to other horses around. Many treatments are used to stop sarcoids, including herbal topicals, freeze firing, surgery or anti-cancer drugs.

Your Horse is Itching: What Can You Do?

- 1 | **Reduce standing water** in the area you are in charge of and ask neighbors to do the same. Help reduce the bug population number. Many horses need a threshold of bites to set off a reaction. Keep the numbers down to get below this threshold.
- 2 | **Bathe your horse often.** Horse urine is three times more attractive to *Culicoides* than cattle urine. Bathe at least three times a week with any soap. (Dawn dish soap works well.) Baths also help remove crusts and decrease bacterial numbers.
- 3 | **Wound cream.** After bathing and drying your horse, massage in an antibiotic-based cream to help heal skin and provide a barrier against flies.
- 4 | **Fly spray.** *Culicoides* dine at night, so spray especially at dusk, but during the day as well if you have an active case. Use several times a day to keep insects away as best as possible. If you see your horses stomping or tail swishing, it is time to re-apply.
- 5 | **Keep horses in stalls at night** with at least two fans running. *Culicoides* are tiny, so they are poor fliers in the wind. Regular screen door mesh (#16 size) is too big. *Culicoides* fly right through it, so get very small mesh on your doors and windows.
- 6 | **Deworm.** Internal parasites rob your horse's immune system. Also *Culicoides* and flies often transport Onchocerca to the skin, so you get a double dose of allergic skin problems. Consider using an Ivermectin-based dewormer once a week for four weeks in active cases.
- 7 | **Nutraceuticals.** Omega 3 fatty acids in flax, chia or wheat germ oil can help skin, studies have shown. Oral herbs help control itching.
- 8 | **Barrier with special sheets.** If you do so, you still must fly spray prior. Clean and change fly sheets often as sweaty, urine-smelling sheets will attract more flies.
- 9 | **Allergy shots/testing.** There are, as noted, many *Culicoides* species, so your horse might not be allergic to the type tested for; as a result, you may think all is well when it is not. Allergy tests do not test for every species. Also, allergy shots targeted for the right species can help, but often fail if your horse is allergic to three, four or six different species and you are getting shots for just one species. Your horse also might be allergic to a certain type in the spring and another species in the fall. Often, people will think all is good by summer but suddenly the horse goes itchy again in September due to the emerging presence of another species.
- 10 | **Move.** Some owners will take their horse to another part of the country and if the horse is comfortable, the horse (and sometimes the owner!) stays there. The species the horse is allergic to is not there or the population number of the species is low. But remember, the door swings both ways. A horse that has never had skin issues might get summer eczema after moving to a new location.
- 11 | **Steroid shots.** These only help for seven to 14 days and pose a risk of laminitis if repeated too often. Also, treating after the horse is bitten is not the best solution. Most veterinarians also agree that IV or oral anti-histamines are of little help.
- 12 | **Don't panic.** Equine summer eczema is not contagious to you or to other horses. The skin problems will not jump onto another horse.

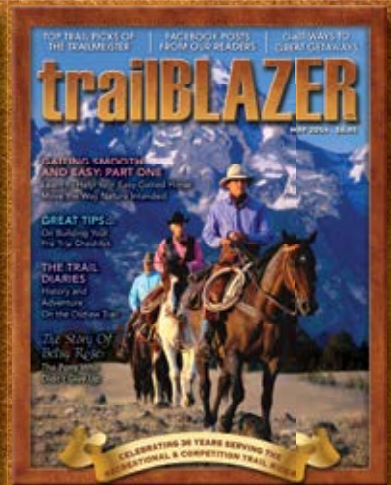
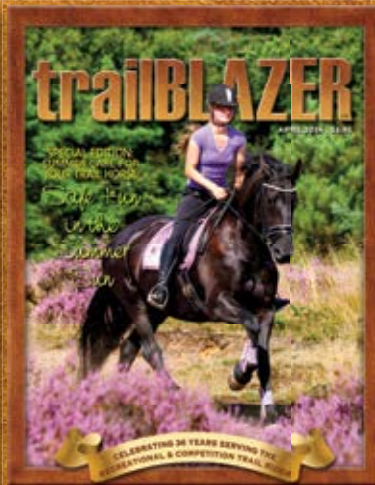
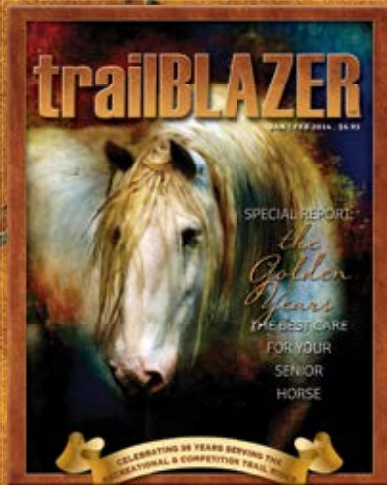
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Frank Reilly, DVM, has been an equine veterinarian for 28 years, working in Florida, Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania. He is a member of the AVMA, AAEP and a veterinary member of the AAPF (Professional Farriers). Dr. Reilly has lectured at the International Laminitis Conference and International Hoof Summit. The practice website equinemed surg.com is ranked #1 on search engines for equine summer eczema.

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