

Managing Sweet Itch

Summer seasonal recurrent dermatitis (SSRD), commonly called sweet itch or summer itch, is caused by an allergic reaction to the saliva of a biting gnat known as the *Culicoides* midge. Many people refer to them as “no-see-ums.” These bothersome fellows are active from April through October. They live and breed in ponds, marshes, and areas where water is standing and stagnant. Gnats can travel up to half a mile to find a good meal. They tend to be most active during the hours around dawn and dusk.

It takes about 48 to 72 hours after the first gnat bite for your horse to start showing symptoms. The severity of the reaction increases from year to year, as your horse becomes increasingly more sensitive to the insect’s saliva. Dorsal feeders are the most common gnat; they feed on the skin around the ears, poll, mane, withers, rump, and tail head. Less common are the ventral feeders that cause problems on the face, chest, and belly.



The symptoms of SSRD are hard to miss. Horses will constantly rub affected areas as a response to the intense itching. In the acute phase (early phase) the skin will become red and inflamed, and devoid of hair. Crusting and weeping sores may be present. In the chronic phase (later phase) the skin will thicken, blacken, and become wrinkled. Sparse, coarse hair may be present. Once winter comes, the area completely heals up.

There are several measures you can take to limit your horse’s exposure to these annoying insects.

- Install fine mesh screen in your barn to keep the gnats out. (This is not always practical, however.)
- Circulate the air with ceiling and stall fans to discourage the gnats from hanging around.
- Keep horses stalled an hour prior to and after dawn and dusk to reduce exposure to the bugs when they are most actively feeding.
- Keep stables at least a half-mile away from marshes and swamps.
- Ensure pastures are well-drained to reduce stagnant water from collecting.
- Keep water tanks clean and filled with fresh water.
- Use insecticides and repellents to kill gnats and keep them off your horse.
- Use a fly sheet with tail flap and hood to cover vulnerable areas.

The sooner you notice SSRD and start on a program of treatment and prevention the better off your horse will be. A horse can do a lot of damage in a short period of time when they start rubbing manes and tails.

When you first notice symptoms, take immediate action to reduce your horse's exposure to these nasty gnats by following the recommendations above. Contact your vet and ask him or her about corticosteroid and antihistamine treatments.

Coating the itchy area daily with an oily substance, like baby oil or Skin So Soft, is often beneficial. Midges don't like the oily film and will avoid it. Be sure to reapply the oil often, as it tends to wear off as the day goes on.

Be careful with preparations that contain eucalyptus oil, citronella oil, tea tree oil, or mineral oil, as they may cause additional skin irritation. Try them somewhere else on your horse first. Watch the area for 24 hours, noting the appearance of any heat or swelling. Don't use any preparation that causes irritation.



Recommended supplements:



FootWise™ coat and hoof conditioner

FootWise contains high-quality proteins and omega fatty acids needed to maintain healthy skin and hair coat. It will support the healing of damaged skin cells and encourage the regrowth of manes and tails. One ounce of FootWise per day will provide the necessary nutrients.



Wiser Concepts® Elevate® Concentrate

The natural vitamin E found in Elevate supports a strong, functional immune system, which will help to ward off secondary infections that can affect skin irritated by allergies. 2,500 IU of Elevate Concentrate is the recommended dose.



Contribute™ omega-3 fatty acid

Omega-3 fatty acids have been proven to reduce skin inflammation and mitigate allergic response. Fish oils contain the highest level of beneficial omega-3 fatty acids. One to two ounces per day of Contribute, depending on severity of the allergy, is recommended.