



Management of Allergies

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Late winter and very early spring is the time to have a conversation with your veterinarian about the best action for prevention of the coming spring allergy season!



Insect Control

Allergies are frustrating for both horses and their owners—the market is flooded with products all preaching salvation for the skin. Insect-related allergies center around the bite and the saliva of the insect. The inflammatory cycle begins in the skin layers, with formation of a raised area (a hive or wheal) that itches. The itching causes damage to the skin, minor bleeding, hair loss, scabs and crusts. Most normal horses tolerate a small amount of itching bites, but allergic horses have an exaggerated response caused by histamine and other inflammatory substances released in the skin. These horses are often so itchy that they will rub their bellies on the ground or on trees or fallen logs, and itch their manes and tails bare on fence rails. The itching is often so incessant and forceful that they will form hematomas (blood blister) near large veins,

especially near the chest, udder and sheath.

The **FIRST** goal of insect allergy management is the prevention of the first few insect bites, so that the exaggerated response can be controlled. The most common insect offenders are the *Culicoides* species (or “no-see-ums”) and other tiny species of gnats. The gnats attack the midline of the abdomen all the way from the lower neck and chest to the groin in some horses, and mane and tail in others. Of course mosquitoes and flies are culprits, too.

Insect control centers around protection of the relevant areas of the horse’s body using blankets, the Belly Dickie (a blanket that covers the lower abdomen), Fly masks, fly repellent sprays, and fly ointments. Many clients are well-versed in mixing their own concoction of fly sprays using Skin So



A fly mask can be an effective tool in your war on insects.

Soft, fly repellents, citronella and eucalyptus oils (and other essential oils), because it seems that the downfall of most fly sprays is that they evaporate too quickly. An oily base allows for a longer contact time. Sadly, some horses can also react to the fly repellants themselves.

Keeping sensitive horses in the barn at dawn and dusk, and using fans to make stall air turbulent for flying insects are also methods of control. Night turnout can also be helpful.



Medical treatments include both oral medications such as antihistamines to control the initial itch, cortico-steroids to control inflammation and swelling, and antibiotics for secondary bacterial infections; as well as topical cortico-steroid sprays and ointments for problem areas.

Desensitizing and Medical options

The **SECOND** goal in the management of these allergic horses is control of, or decrease in, the skin reaction. Allergy injections are now available to help us achieve this goal. The injections act by desensitizing the horse against the compounds found in *Culicoides* saliva. These injections

may significantly improve the quality of life in the Northeast for some horses. The volume to be injected is very small and the needle size required is tiny—so allergy shots for horses can be fairly user-friendly.

The **THIRD** goal of allergy management focuses on treating the results of the reaction.

Insect Bite Prevention,

Use:

- Fly Mask
- Fly sheet
- Belly Dickie
- Fly repellants
- Night turnout
- Stall fans