



Ark Vet Centre

Equine Newsletter



March 2024



Welcome to the March newsletter, at times it felt like we were back into winter this month but with the clocks changed now spring feels like its almost here! We know many of you will now be looking ahead to ride out season as its fast approaching and some of you may be getting ready to welcome foals as we move in to a busy time of year for our Equine vets! This is a time of year where pollen levels are on the rise and we generally start to see coughs or itching in horses with seasonal allergies. This month we will discuss the best approach to an itchy horse at this time of year as its something we see very commonly.

Itchy horses

Many horses are affected by allergies during the summer months, with potential allergens including tree, grass and flower pollens, and the saliva of biting insects (sweet itch). The most common signs are intense itching and hives, with sweet itch this is usually around the mane and tail but with other allergies it can involve the whole body. Managing these cases can be incredibly challenging and requires the creation of an effective treatment and management plan.

Treatment plans fall into three main areas:

- **Preventing exposure to the allergen** - this involves environmental control or barriers such as rugs/fly repellent
- **Minimising the allergic response and associated inflammation.** Steroids are potent anti-inflammatories widely used in the management of allergic diseases. There is a small risk of associated laminitis with these that needs to be considered. Antihistamines can be a useful additional treatment in allergic skin conditions or may be sufficient for milder cases.
- **Altering the immune response.** Following identification of allergens by allergy testing, a course of immunotherapy may be successful (this will be discussed in more detail later)



Types of allergies:

Sweet itch is an allergy to the saliva of *Culicoides* midges and is the most common cause of skin itchiness over the summer. It is not possible to cure the condition, only to manage it, and prevention is better cure. To prevent biting, horses should be stabled when midges are most active – at dawn, dusk and on overcast, humid days and a good insect-proof rug should be worn. Fly repellents containing permethrin are effective and last several days. Once a horse has been bitten and reacted, treatment is aimed at reducing inflammation and the itch. Oatmeal and aloe shampoos can be soothing and steroids will reduce the itch. Antihistamines are generally ineffective as a sole treatment, but are worth trying for milder cases.

Some horses have allergic reactions to other biting insects, such as black flies, stable flies and horse flies, with oozing bites and hives. Prevention and treatment is the same as for sweet itch.

Atopic dermatitis is an allergic reaction due to environmental allergens eg. Dust mites, pollen or food which affects the skin. Hives and itching is the most common signs. Often with these cases we need to determine what the horse is allergic to enable us to see if it is something we can exclude from the horse such as food or if its something that is impossible to exclude such as grass pollens. This will usually involve blood testing. Management is very similar to sweet itch with steroids or anti-histamines being the main medications we can use.

Immunotherapy

This works by injecting horses with a small amount of the allergen which will stimulate an immune response which leads to the horse being desensitised to the allergen. This means that over the time the symptoms can be reduced and they become less affected by that type of allergen. It is effective in over 50% of cases and is very safe and effective long term which makes it better than using steroids or anti-histamines long term.

