

Insect Hypersensitivity

We all enjoy being outside taking in the great summer weather. However, even the most relaxing activities can be cut short due to insects. Insects are not always just a nuisance to our horses. Some unfortunate horses are actually allergic to insect bites. This allergic reaction is known as insect hypersensitivity.

Symptoms that your horse may be having an allergic reaction to insect bites are hives or welts that can occur anywhere on the body but are often concentrated around the head, neck and shoulders. Some horses do not seem to notice that they have many bumps on their body; however, many horses are very pruritic or “itchy.”

Arriving at a diagnosis is often simple. A thorough physical exam and history can rule out other causes of skin conditions. Some less straight forward cases may require other diagnostic tests such as skin scraping, skin biopsy or intradermal testing.

Treatment of insect hypersensitivity can be both rewarding and difficult. Simple methods include stabling horses during the early morning and dusk hours when insects are most active. Fly sheets, fly masks and fly boots can all be physical methods of control that are non invasive and relatively inexpensive. Fly repellants, insecticides and fly traps can all decrease the number of insects around our horses. An often over-looked weapon in insect control is sanitation. There should be no standing water and manure should be regularly removed from the area. Many horses will require veterinary intervention. We often prescribe a short course of glucocorticoids or “steroids.” Anti-histamines will help relieve the symptoms of many horses but, not all anti-histamines are equally effective.

With a multi-pronged approach, horses with insect hypersensitivity can have a normal and healthy life.