



## June

### **Sweet Itch**

Sweet Itch can be a real problem at this time of year, and is a real frustration to horses, owners and vets alike. Sweet Itch is the most common allergic skin disease seen in the horse and is caused by a hypersensitivity reaction to the culicoides midge. The season of midge activity varies according to the area and weather conditions but ranges from March through to October.

The management of sweet itch has two aspects to consider:

#### **1. Prevention**

This is based around avoidance of the midge bites. Strategies include:

- Stabling during peak midge activity (dawn and dusk)
- Copious insect repellent (those containing DEET are most effective)
- Topical insecticides – Pyrethrin containing products such as Switch or Deosect.
- Fly screens/fans in stables
- Barrier fly sheets (eg Boett rugs)
- Relocation away from fields which are near ponds or standing water
- Benzyl Benzoate applied topically has an oily barrier effect and mild anti-inflammatory properties and is an insecticide also

#### **2. Treatment**

There is no cure for sweet itch and a vaccine is not yet available. Treatment is designed to reduce the inflammation and itchiness associated with the disease:

- Topical corticosteroids
- Systemic corticosteroids (injectable or tablet form). Systemic steroids can have side effects and so their use should be under veterinary supervision only.
- Desensitisation to sweet itch can be attempted but can be expensive and with mixed results.

Sweet itch varies in severity, however in the worst cases it can be an extremely distressing condition. Success revolves around early recognition and treatment of the disease. In horses known to be prone to sweet itch, prevention at the start of the midge season is critical.