



10 Tips for Managing Equine Insect Hypersensitivity

Insect bite hypersensitivity (IBH) leads to an itchy (and often miserable) horse, and what starts as itchiness from a bug bite can cascade into a serious and lifelong management challenge. Commonly known as “sweet itch” or “Queensland itch,” IBH results from an allergic reaction to the saliva of biting insects and arachnids such as *Culicoides* (aka “no-see-ums,” midges, gnats), mosquitoes, black flies, horn flies, ticks, and many more. The bites elicit an allergic response from sensitive horses, resulting in hives (urticaria) and/or crusty patches of bumps.



Limiting insect exposure is the best defense against insect bite hypersensitivity in horses

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1 Early veterinary intervention for IBH is ideal to help manage horses over the course of their lifetimes. Avoidance of bites is the most important management strategy. **TheHorse.com/39008**

2 Research shows that supplementing diets with plant-based omega-3 fatty acids can decrease the inflammatory mediator synthesis. In one study, feeding a pound of flaxseed per day to horses with sweet itch was associated with a significant decrease in reactivity to the *Culicoides* extract used during intradermal allergy testing. Feed fresh-ground or stabilized ground flax. **TheHorse.com/38336**

3 Topical ointments containing antihistamines and/or corticosteroids might also offer your horse relief. However, there's no IBH cure, and multimodal management is usually the best option for horses with the condition. **TheHorse.com/37988**

4 A well-fitted, light-colored fly sheet can create a barrier between bugs and sensitive skin without compounding heat. Look for durable fabric with some stretch, so the blanket forms to and moves with the horse. Some horses might require a neck cover and even a hood or bonnet. Sheets impregnated with insect repellent can offer an extra layer of protection. **TheHorse.com/32472**

5 Many insects that cause IBH are poor fliers. Placing a horse under fans strong enough to disrupt insect flight can help prevent them from landing and biting. To reduce the risk of barn fire associated with fans, always use commercial or industrial farm fans designed for use in barns. TheHorse.com/39008

6 Encourage insect-eating birds and bats to move onto your property to reduce the flying insect population. One adult swallow, for example, consumes thousands of soft-bodied flying insects each day. TheHorse.com/37457

7 Many fly traps and papers are designed to attract house flies. Instead, use traps made to catch stable flies, and place those traps in an area that draws insects away from horses. TheHorse.com/39008

8 Avoid turning out horses during times of the day when insects are most active. TheHorse.com/38323

9 Limit standing water, which attracts midges and creates a breeding ground for mosquitos and other biting insects. Clean and refresh water buckets and troughs frequently. TheHorse.com/38323

10 Simple cold water hosing can help relieve itching in horses. Avoid washing horses with harsh detergents and scented shampoos, which can break down protective natural oils and further irritate the skin. TheHorse.com/39008

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