

THE HEAT IS ON!

By Catherine Rabau | Equidiet Equine Nutritionist

In hot weather, flies are the bane of a horse's existence. They carry disease, suck blood and can cause summer itch—also known as “sweet itch”—which is particularly common in the heat of summer. It is an allergic reaction to the saliva in biting flies.

An allergy is an exaggerated response from the immune system to a substance in the environment. Although horses can become allergic to what they eat, inhale, or touch, the most common equine allergies are insect bite hypersensitivity and recurrent airway obstruction (RAO or “heaves”). Horses that react to insect bites and other skin allergens may develop hives, itching, hair loss, scaling and crusting, and eventually whitening of hairs and thickening of skin in the affected areas. If the mane and tail are affected and itchy, horses may rub until hairs are broken, developing the classic “rat tail.”
Nutrition May Lend Support

Summer itch can indeed be very itchy and can cause the horse to rub and bite to the point of bleeding. Horse owners should learn how to prevent and treat summer itch so that horses in their care can enjoy life in warm climates and during the summer.

Recent studies have shown that supplementing horses with omega-3 fatty acids reduces inflammation. Specifically, a comparison of corn oil to fish oil demonstrated that feeding corn oil resulted in higher amounts of inflammatory markers in the body. Feeding flax seed to horses with “sweet itch” caused a significant decrease in the allergic skin response to *Culicoides* (minute insects called “midges”), which cause the majority of skin allergies in horses.

Other supplements that may reduce a horse's allergic response include MSM; adaptogens such as ginseng and other herbs; and digestive enzymes and probiotics (as contained in Alltech's LifeForce Formula). These help support the GI system, where most of the horse's immune system is located.

A Natural Solution: Chia

Depending upon availability in your geographic zone, a helpful measure may be to feed horses an herb named “chia.” This is a generic term used to describe several *Salvia* species, all members of the mint family. Chia is an annual herb, with grains about 2 mm long, oval and brown to black. It is rich in essential oils, which act as a natural repellent to insects.

The Aztecs and their descendants cultivated chia centuries ago. Today chia is cultivated commercially in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia and Peru but cannot be cultivated in Europe because it requires a long growing season and sub-tropical conditions. In the United States, it can only be cultivated in southern Texas and California.

Supplements containing chia seeds can benefit the equine diet because of their anti-inflammatory and hypoallergenic properties.



Nutritional Content of Chia

Chia is a source of essential fatty acids and natural antioxidants. The high oil content of chia provides a higher energy value than other natural grains such as rice or corn. Chia grain contains natural antioxidants that help preserve the oil stored within the seed and prevent it from turning rancid.

Chia provides:

- Energy (increased fat intake in a concentrated form)
- Mucilage (high level of mucilaginous fiber to keep normal gut transit, to be used in a mash instead of flax without needed to be cooked)
- Omega-3 fatty acids (maintain normal levels of lipids and triglycerides in blood, help support cardiovascular system and show an anti-inflammatory effect)

Omega-3 fatty acids play numerous other beneficial roles in the horse's body. They improve vision, decrease the formation of clots in blood vessels, improve learning ability in young stock and stimulate immune responsiveness. Research is being conducted on their effects on chronic inflammatory diseases, such as arthrosis.

How to Treat a Horse for Summer Itch

If nutritional support is not effective, try the following:

- Buy the strongest over-the-counter cortisone available. Clean the affected area thoroughly and apply a liberal amount of cortisone ointment to it.
- Your veterinarian may prescribe an antihistamine for your horse to help control his reaction to the bites. Prescription steroids may also be necessary if the condition is severe enough.
- Apply fly protection daily to the horse's coat. For added protection, consider buying a fly sheet to hinder flies from biting.
- Use fly bait in the barn and larvaecide blocks in the pastures.
- Keep your horses on a regular deworming schedule.
- Remove manure from barns and pastures to prevent them from becoming breeding grounds for insects.

Research on Chia and Horses

During the summer months, a field trial was conducted with four horses, all of which had shown mosquito hypersensitivity (summer itch). Two of the horses were fed two cups of chia seeds as a supplement to the normal feed ration. All four horses were trained and fed on a similar basis, except for the chia supplement.

Result: The two horses that received the chia supplement did not exhibit mosquito hypersensitivity. They showed better skin condition, improvement of dermatitis and lower allergy to insect bites.

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