

VET DIARY

Skin deep

Our regular vet writer Nicola Thompson plays detective to discover what is causing a pony's itchy skin

Over the summer months I've seen lots of itchy horses. The flies and midges have been out in force, and some horses are more reactive than others.

Sometimes, an itchy horse is allergic to more than biting insects and other factors can complicate matters, making them difficult cases to treat. This is something I encountered with Robin, a sweet New Forest Pony.

The problem started as itchiness on his face and neck, plus hair loss. It spread along his neck and sides.

Initial treatment was a wash to kill lice, a mite treatment and soothing shampoos to help combat the itching.

This helped a little and Robin cheered up slightly but the hair loss continued to spread. His owner, Nicola, was concerned that Robin was so itchy and didn't look his usual shiny self.

She was keen to find out what was wrong and treat him properly. I used antihistamines and steroid cream to help relieve the itch.

To help diagnose the cause of the problem, I took a biopsy of his skin for lab testing. I used an instrument called a 'punch', which cuts the skin like a cookie cutter. The skin is numbed first with local anaesthetic and often horses don't need sedation as they cannot feel it.

The skin samples I took from Robin were 8mm in diameter, so I didn't even need to stitch the wounds afterwards.

As is often the case, when the lab reported back, there wasn't a definitive answer but indications were of inflammation with a possible allergic cause and a deep-seated skin infection.



OUR EXPERT

Nicola Thompson is a qualified vet who works for Wright & Moreton in Cheshire, a member practice of XL Equine. She has ridden since she was a child.



Robin was very itchy and his hair started falling out



"The hair loss continued to spread – Robin was itchy and he didn't look his usual shiny self"

Further tests

The next step was allergy testing. First, I put Robin on a six-week course of antibiotics to clear up his skin infection.

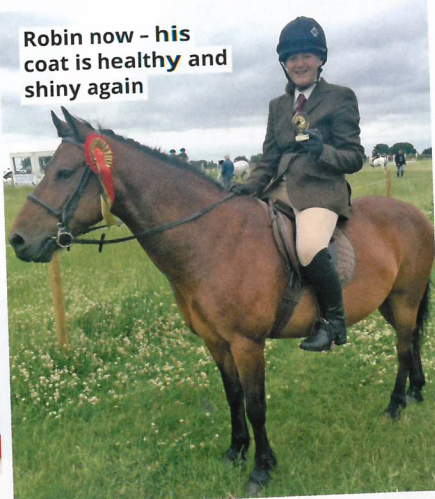
After a fortnight, there was some improvement and this continued until the bumps had resolved. This is a long course of antibiotics but it is sometimes necessary in cases like Robin's.

Intradermal allergy testing involves injecting small amounts of different substances (allergens) into the skin and measuring the horse's response to them.

The allergens I use include pollens, animal skin cells, grasses and insects.

We also use a substance which will create a big reaction and one which should create no reaction. These are used as guides to measure all the other reactions and how significant the allergic response is.

Robin now - his coat is healthy and shiny again



The horse or pony can't have had any medication that will reduce allergic responses. Therefore, we stopped Robin's antihistamines and steroid cream in plenty of time before the test.

Making progress

We discovered Robin was sensitive to rye grass, several types of insect, house dust mites and dogs. So, we have looked at ways to avoid these as much as possible.

He is now fed Timothy hay, dogs are not allowed in his stable and his rugs have been cleaned to remove mites. He wears a fly rug when turned out and lots of fly spray. He also is kept in when flies are very active.

These things made a real difference to Robin. His hair grew back and he became much less irritated.

I also ordered a vaccine made from the allergens he responded to, which should help his body become less sensitive to things.

Robin is a fairly dramatic case but a good example of how skin problems can be complicated and how management is just as important as medication for some sufferers. I am very pleased that Robin is doing so well! ■

Next issue: Nicola discusses a patient that suffered laminitis due to being overweight.