



A **bumpy** ride

Most horse owners will have experienced some degree of allergic reaction in their horse. Urticaria causes raised lumps and, although most common in the summer, it can happen at other times, too. XLEquine vets explain how to deal with that itch



Urticaria can appear anywhere, but the trunk is the most common place

Urticaria – often called hives or nettle rash – is one of the most commonly encountered skin diseases in horses. It is an allergic reaction manifested in the appearance of soft, raised skin nodules. The signs of urticaria are usually the sudden appearance of soft nodules or raised, doughnut-shaped areas over part or most of the horse's skin. If severe, they can ooze a clear liquid, called serum.

They are occasionally itchy but are not normally painful. It's important to remember that the horse is unaware of its dramatic appearance, because otherwise his health is normal. However, if the horse becomes irritated by the disease then veterinary attention should be sought.

The areas affected are of cosmetic significance only and will usually resolve within a few days. Some cases may take up to a fortnight, or occasionally longer.

What causes it?

Recent changes in the diet, environment or management are often to blame.

- Many causes have been implicated, including pollen, fly bites, stings, certain diets (often cereal-based) and drug administration.
- Physical trigger factors can include temperature extremes, severe exercise, stress or physical pressure.

What does it look like?

The swellings usually appear suddenly and normally cover areas over the neck and body, but can appear over most of the horse's body.



The lumps can vary from pea- to palm-size!

Treatment

- A skin biopsy will confirm the condition, but will not identify the allergen.
- If fly bites or stings are the cause, then fly repellents and rugs should be considered.
- Symptomatic treatment of locally-affected areas with mild antiseptic solutions, and the application of corticosteroid and antibiotic creams, may be useful.
- If the reaction is severe, a steroid by injection or in feed may be required.
- Skin patch testing can be helpful in identifying the allergen. A desensitisation programme can be instigated, which involves very gradual exposure to increasing amounts of the allergen in the hope of reducing the allergic response. The allergen is usually given by a series of injections over a number of weeks.
- Opinions vary on the usefulness of blood testing. The laboratory fees can be expensive and the results difficult to interpret in a practical and useful way.
- Antihistamines can occasionally be useful.



If flies are the culprit, a fly rug can help

Key points to remember

- Urticaria occurs following exposure to an allergen (something to which the horse is allergic).
- It is usually only of cosmetic significance.
- It may resolve spontaneously following change in the environment, diet or management.
- In some cases, treatment with steroids may be necessary.
- Likely to reoccur as the cause (allergen) may be difficult to pinpoint.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

XLEquine is a group of 35 independently owned equine veterinary practices who work together. To find out more about urticaria, and other treatments and conditions, visit xlequine.co.uk

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Prevention

The allergen that causes the rash may be difficult to pinpoint. It could have been encountered through inhalation, ingestion or contact.

If the allergen has been identified, then removal would be the most ideal treatment. **If the allergen is unknown** then changing the environment, management or diet may allow the condition to resolve.

If your horse **suffers repeatedly**, then a detailed examination of his recent history can be useful for identifying the allergen and its future avoidance. You can do this by tracking which paddock he is turned out in and for how long, exactly what he eats, products used on his skin and anything he comes into contact with (for example, the brand of washing powder used on his saddlecloth).

A swollen mouth is less common – but potentially more severe



Certain cereal based diets may be best avoided



Check feed and supplement ingredients