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Literature Review Approaching the Future Management of Sweet Itch

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Literature Review

Approaching the Future Management of Sweet Itch

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Abstract

Insect bite hypersensitivity (IBH), commonly known as sweet itch, continues to prove frustrating to manage in practice. IBH is the most common allergic skin disease of horses, characterised as a hypersensitivity to the salivary proteins of the *Culicoides* genus of insects. The complex nature of this allergic disease means that no set of affected horses can be managed in the same way. Common approaches to sweet itch can be broken down into the categories of anti-inflammatories, allergen avoidance, skin conditioning, and immunotherapy. Many effective management techniques focus on the avoidance of insect bites, and regular washing of the skin. Current advances are being made towards effective immunotherapy, with varied results in clinical trials and in practice. As a result of this, a multimodal approach to the management of IBH is often recommended.

Keywords: Equine; Sweet Itch; Insect Bite Hypersensitivity; Horse; Allergy

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1 **Introduction**

2 Insect bite hypersensitivity (IBH) is the most common allergic skin disease of horses, causing
3 a localised pruritus to the feeding sites of the biting midge (Scott and Miller, 2011;
4 Schaffartzik et al., 2012) (*Figures 1 and 2*). The seasonal nature of this disease has been
5 attributed to the biting insects of the genus *Culicoides*, which are traditionally associated with
6 dry warm days between the spring and autumn in the UK (Meiswinkel et al., 2000; Van
7 Grevenhof et al., 2007). Midge breeding sites tend to congregate around densely wooded
8 areas, or those that harbour stagnant water, which can lead to increased numbers of biting
9 insects (Carpenter et al., 2008). However, the prevalence of IBH is also subject to
10 considerable variations depending on the breed and, even more so, on family lineage
11 (Littlewood, 1998; Van Grevenhof et al., 2007).

12
13 It is important that we gain an effective understanding of the pathogenesis of IBH at a
14 cellular level. Avoiding allergens may seem a sensible suggestion, but the consequences of
15 climate change means that it is becoming ever more difficult to evade the *Culicoides* midges.
16 As it stands, a total of 27 salivary gland proteins have been identified as causative allergens
17 in IBH (Novotny et al., 2021). Therefore, our management of this condition is going to likely
18 require a greater understanding of targets within the cellular allergic response. The phenotype
19 of IBH is predominated by a Type I hypersensitivity reaction in which allergen-specific T
20 cells with a Th2-like cytokine profile and specific IgE are involved (Schaffartzik et al., 2012).
21 There is also a noted role of IL-4 and IL-13 (Jonsdottir et al., 2019), and in the latter phase of
22 Type 1 hypersensitivities, TH2-derived IL-5 will trigger an eosinophilia (Larché et al., 2006).
23 IL-31 is also derived from Th2 cells and is integral in the manifestation of allergic pruritus
24 via interactions with receptors on the dorsal root ganglia within the skin (Sonkoly et al.,
25 2006).

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Delayed hypersensitivities (Type 4) are also characterised by IL-5 producing TH2 cells and eosinophilia, which has led to some interpretation of IBH as a combination of Type 1 and Type 4 hypersensitivity (Kurotaki et al., 1994). However, this is difficult to discern as separate from chronic and repeated inflammatory changes which ultimately lead to eosinophils as the predominant cell type associated with IBH.

Approaches to managing IBH can be divided into four categories: allergen avoidance, skin integrity, anti-inflammatories, and immunotherapy.

Allergen Avoidance

Although many different approaches for treatment of IBH have been described, the most effective method is the avoidance of *Culicoides* allergens. Avoidance or reduced allergen exposure is commonly achieved attempted by covering the skin with rugs (Olsen et al., 2010). Anecdotally, it would seem the most effective of these rugs is the Boett® Sweet Itch Blanket, but this is also by far the most expensive. Beside these rugs, horses can be stabled from mid- afternoon to mid-morning (Nelson and Bellamy, 1971), or even relocated to other parts of the country if the owners are dedicated. Regions with lower insect populations tend to be near the seaside, or sometimes higher altitudes, providing dense heathered and woody areas are avoided. Mosquito netting can be used to seal stable doors and windows to minimize *Culicoides* entry into the stable environment (Baker et al., 2015; Lincoln et al., 2015).

Insect repellents are also applied readily by owners, with variable results. Topical cypermethrin is the only scientifically reported pour-on to partially protect against biting flies as exposure can kill midges if exposed for at least 3 minutes (Papadopoulos et al., 2010).

51 Whether this is enough time before an insect-bite results in clinical signs remains to be
52 determined. Some essential oils, such as lemon grass extract, has been proven to be repellent
53 in laboratory studies, and have been considered an alternative to chemical compounds
54 (Baldacchino et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2014).

55

56 **Skin Integrity**

57 Allergic reactions result in inflammation and pruritus, which will lead to trauma and
58 subsequent compromise to the skin integrity. Although skin health is not necessarily an
59 impenetrable barrier to the bite of *Culicoides* midges, there is certainly evidence that topical
60 emollients and in-feed supplementation can aid in reducing clinical signs of IBH.

61 Omega fatty acids 3 and 6 are approved in the treatment of canine atopic dermatitis (Müller
62 et al., 2004; Olivry et al., 2010), and while they are thought to help stabilise the epidermal
63 lipid barrier (Hansen and Jensen, 1985), there is good evidence that they are an aid in
64 suppression of enzymes integral to the inflammatory cascade (Vaughn et al., 1994).

65 Considering these findings, a study by O'Neill et al. (2002) suggested some benefit in using
66 flaxseed oil to mitigate the skin test response to *Culicoides* extract from hypersensitive
67 horses. Although this is encouraging, Friberg and Logas (1999) found that linseed oil
68 supplementation had no effect on the level of pruritus observed between the control and
69 experimental groups. Given that beneficial effects have only been seen at doses of 1g/Kg, the
70 cost of oil volume required can hinder their use in horses and ponies, especially those
71 predisposed to equine metabolic syndrome.

72 There is only one recent study that showed topical creams to be useful for resolving lesions
73 incurred by IBH, but pruritus remained unaffected in the horses, and some had adverse
74 reactions to the emollient (Humann and Muller, 2019). Topical essential oils have also shown
75 some promise with regards to improving skin lesions and pruritic scores in a small group of

76 horses (Cox et al., 2020), but a commercial essential oil product can prove difficult and
77 expensive to source at the correct concentration.
78 Despite the lacking scientific evidence, consensus across many veterinarians is that regular
79 shampooing can be one of the most beneficial tools with regards to soothing skin and
80 repairing the skin barrier (Table 1). Owner compliance is the mediating factor in the success
81 of this therapy.

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83 **Anti-inflammatories**

84 The primary focus of controlling the inflammatory process of IBH is often through the use of
85 corticosteroids, but other pharmaceutical preparations are available to help in management of
86 the disease.

87 Topical steroids in the form of creams or sprays are rarely effective as a sole treatment, but
88 when used with insect avoidance and management changes, they can help avoid the need for
89 systemic steroids, or reduce the systemic dose if used in conjunction with oral steroids. No
90 topical steroid products are licensed for use in horses (Table 2), but there are many
91 preparations available for use in small animal allergic skin disease. These topical products
92 can become costly and inefficient for treatment of large areas of affected skin.

93 Antihistamines can be of some use as a sole treatment, but have been shown to work best as a
94 preventative due to histamine having a greater effect in the initial phases of IBH. Therefore,
95 antihistamines should ideally be given prior to exposure to *Culicoides* allergens (Marsella,
96 2013). There are no licenced antihistamine formulations for horses, so there is a wide range
97 of doses available (Table 3). Moreover, a recent study has shown that cetirizine has no
98 benefit in the treatment of IBH (Olsén et al., 2011). The use of antihistamines in combination
99 with corticosteroids could be effective at reducing the systemic steroid dose while effectively
100 managing pruritis associated with IBH.

101 For cases where pruritis and self-trauma associated with IBH cannot be controlled with
102 topical therapy and antihistamines, systemic medication with corticosteroids can be
103 implemented. Injectable therapy is often suitable initially for acute pruritic episodes, but this
104 is rarely practical in the long term (Mora Pereira et al., 2018). Oral corticosteroid treatment
105 could be safer, though care should still be taken in horses with susceptibility to laminitis, and
106 once clinical remission is achieved the aim should be to reduce the dose to the lowest
107 effective maintenance dose to limit the risk of undesirable side effects.

108

109 **Immunotherapy**

110 Despite the popular use of allergen specific immunotherapy (ASIT) in horses with atopy, this
111 has not translated into treatment of IBH. The trials exploring ASIT use in horses with IBH
112 used whole body extract sourced from midges that were unfamiliar to the horses'
113 environment (Barbet et al., 1990; Anderson et al., 1996; Ginel et al., 2014). At best, the
114 results of these studies are weak positive, and do not always account for improved
115 environmental control during the experiment. The identification of pure salivary gland
116 proteins from various *Culicoides* species are integral to successful ASIT in horses with IBH.
117 It is important to remember that the aim of ASIT is to stimulate an appropriate Th1/Treg cell
118 type response, as opposed to a Th2 type response. This is the possible basis behind the
119 anecdotal success of Insol® Dermatophyton (Boehringer Ingleheim) ringworm vaccine.
120 Despite a lack in statistically significant clinical improvement, one study did demonstrate
121 increased inflammatory markers indicative of a Th1/Treg cell type response (Gehlen et al.,
122 2016). It would seem that, until a more specific form of ASIT becomes available, the use of
123 commercial Insol® Dermatophyton may be appropriate as long as owners are made aware of
124 its off-licence use and cost of import. Two injections (1ml) are given intramuscularly,

125 approximately 4 weeks apart prior to the start of the sweet-itch season. This can be followed
126 by booster injections every 6 months-1 year.

127

128 On an experimental level, there are some exciting advances with regards to the targeting of
129 interleukins that are integral to the inflammatory process involved in IBH. The use of
130 Lokivetmab (Cytoint, Zoetis) is now commonplace in the treatment of canine atopic
131 dermatitis following successful double blinded placebo control trials (Michels et al., 2016;
132 Moyaert et al., 2017). This is a dose-dependent monoclonal antibody designed to target IL-
133 31. Trials to produce an equine equivalent have started, first providing evidence of a role for
134 IL-31 in IBH, and then stating improved clinical scores of patients following treatment
135 (Olomski et al., 2020).

136 Attempts are also being made to produce an active immune response against IL-5. The
137 carefully formulated vaccine was found to initially reduce peripheral eosinophil counts, and
138 consequently improved clinical symptoms in the second year of vaccination (Fettelschoss-
139 Gabriel et al., 2019). The same authors have attempted to utilise the same active vaccination
140 technology to produce an IL-31 vaccine for a small group of chronically pruritic horses
141 (Fettelschoss et al., 2021) with some positive results, albeit without a control group.

142

143 **Conclusion**

144 Although many management methods remain the same, our understanding of IBH is ever
145 improving. With greater knowledge of the immunopathogenesis of this debilitating disease
146 comes an ability to tackle new targets in the inflammatory and allergic process.

147

148 **Conflicts of interest**

149 The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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285 **Figure Legends**

286

287 **Figure 1 a)** The mane of a pony that has suffered from chronic IBH. Note the shortening of
288 the hairs and the dull brittle nature hair ends. **b)** The tail of the same pony. The hairs are
289 almost absent here, giving the pony a ‘rat-tail’ appearance.

290

291 **Figure 2 a)** The ear tip of a pony that has been suffering from chronic IBH. The skin is
292 alopecic, thickened, a keratinised. **b)** The undercarriage of the same pony. The sheath and
293 ventrum are also thickened and alopecic, as a consequence of the pony having been rubbing
294 its belly on the ground.

295

296 **Key Points**

- 297 - The sweet itch 'season' is becoming broader due to changes in climate.
- 298 - Our understanding of the immunopathogenesis is still developing, but the presence of IgE
299 and eosinophils is consistent across all models.
- 300 - It is important to tackle the symptoms of sweet itch with a multimodal approach: allergen
301 avoidance, skin integrity, anti-inflammatories, and immunotherapy.
- 302 - Pharmacological therapeutics have not changed for many years. A multimodal approach
303 using corticosteroids and antihistamines can be attempted, but is not always effective.
- 304 - Scientific advances are happening in the field of immunotherapy, targeting IL-31 and IL-5.
305 These have proven successful in small animal medicine.









Topical Product	Primary Base	Mode of Action	Frequency of Application
Coatex (VetPlus)	Oatmeal Shampoo	- Cooling - Antipruritic - Moisturising - Cleanse Hair and Skin	Bath once-twice weekly
Episooth (Virbac)	Oatmeal Shampoo	- Cooling - Antipruritic - Moisturising - Cleanse Hair and Skin	Bath once-twice weekly
DermAllay (Dechra)	Oatmeal Shampoo	- Cooling - Antipruritic - Moisturising - Cleanse Hair and Skin	Bath once-twice weekly
Skin So Soft (Avon)	Jojoba Oil Conditioner	- Insect Repellent - Antipruritic - Moisturising	Apply to affected areas once daily

Table 1: Examples of common shampoos and conditioners utilised to aid in improving skin integrity for horses and ponies suffering from IBH and other allergic skin diseases. Unfortunately, no commercial essential oil product exists on the market that is equivalent to that used by Cox et al. (2020).

Topical Corticosteroid	Commercial Formulation
Hydrocortisone	<i>Cortavance Cutaneous Spray (Virbac)</i>
Triamcinolone	<i>Dermanolon Cutaneous Spray (Dechra)</i>
Betamethasone	<i>Isaderm cream (Dechra)</i> <i>Betnovate cream (GSK)</i> <i>Betafuse cream (Norbrook)</i>

Table 2: Listed formulations of topical corticosteroids that can be applied to localised areas of pruritus.

	Drug	Dose	Frequency	Trade name
Corticosteroids	Prednisolone	1mg/kg PO	SID	<i>EquiPred (Virbac)</i> <i>Equisolon</i> <i>(Dechra)</i>
	Dexamethasone PO	0.01- 0.1mg/kg	SID/EOD	<i>Dexadreson (MSD</i> <i>Animal Health)</i>
	Dexamethasone IV	0.01- 0.1mg/kg	SID	<i>Colvasone</i> <i>(Norbrook)</i> <i>Rapidexon</i> <i>(Dechra)</i> <i>Duphacort Q</i> <i>(Zoetis)</i>
Antihistamines	Chlorpheniramine	0.2-0.5mg/kg PO	BID/TID	<i>Piriton (GSK)</i>
	Hydroxyzine hydrochloride	0.25- 1.5mg/kg PO	BID/TID	<i>Atarax (GSK)</i>

Table 3: Listed corticosteroids and antihistamines with associated dose ranges, frequency of administration, and commercial products available.