

# Urticaria (Hives or Nettle Rash)

Urticaria 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 or plaques. It tends to be seasonal with the highest incidence occurring in the late spring or summer months.



**THESE SWELLINGS USUALLY APPEAR SUDDENLY AND NORMALLY COVER AREAS OVER THE NECK AND FLANKS BUT CAN APPEAR OVER MOST OF THE HORSE'S BODY**

## Clinical signs

- The signs of urticaria are 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.
- The horse is unaware of its dramatic appearance as otherwise its health is normal. If the horse becomes irritated by the disease then veterinary attention should be sought.
- The areas affected are usually of cosmetic significance only and will usually resolve within a few days. Some cases may take up to a fortnight, or occasionally longer.
- There may be a history of recent changes in the diet, environment or in management regimes.
- Many causes have been implicated such as pollen, fly bites, stings, certain diets (often cereal based) or drug administration.
- Physical factors can also trigger urticaria such as temperature extremes, intense exercise, stress or physical pressure.

## KEY POINTS:

- **disease occurs following exposure to an allergen (the substance to which the horse is allergic);**
- **usually only of cosmetic significance;**
- **may resolve spontaneously following change in the environment, diet or management;**
- **treatment with steroid injection is often necessary;**
- **likely to reoccur as the cause (allergen) may be difficult to pinpoint.**



**HIVES ON THE NECK**

## Treatment

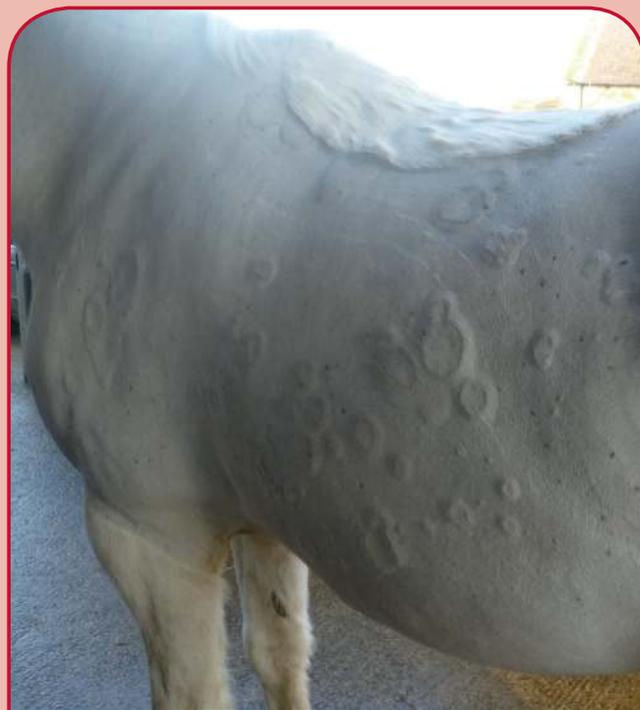
- If the allergen has been identified then removal would be the ideal treatment.
- If the allergen is unknown then changing the environment, management or diet may cause the condition to resolve.
- A skin biopsy will confirm the condition but will not identify the allergen.
- If seasonal, and fly bites 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 severe a steroid by injection or in feed may be required.
- Skin patch testing can be helpful in identifying the allergy and then a desensitising programme can be instigated. Blood tests are fairly unreliable.
- Antihistamines can occasionally be useful.



**SWOLLEN LIPS AND MUZZLE**

## Prevention

- The causal allergen may be difficult or impossible to pinpoint.
- It can be encountered through inhalation, ingestion or contact.
- If the allergen is known, then excluding this from the environment or diet will be helpful.
- Drugs which provide a trigger should be avoided.
- Some causes are physical such as extremes in heat or cold, stress or severe exercise and these are more difficult to control.
- Fly repellents or fly rugs may be useful.
- Certain cereal based diets may be best avoided.
- Reducing stress can be helpful.
- Detailed examination of the horse's recent history can be useful for identifying the allergen and its future avoidance.



**SWELLINGS ON THE BODY**

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