

What is essential care for a horse with Queensland Itch?



You should suspect that your horse has 'Queensland Itch' if it develops a reoccurring, itchy skin condition every summer and if the itching occurs mainly around the butt of the tail and around the base of the



This 'itchy' horse has typical 'scabby' skin which would be much worse if the horse was not rugged.

mane. In bad cases the itchy areas involve the whole back area and the ears and face. Yet other horses are affected on the chest and belly (in addition to the other areas).

The usual cause of Queensland Itch is a hypersensitivity to the bites of midges (of the species *Culicoides*). The cause is actually an allergic reaction to chemicals in the saliva of the midge. When the horse is bitten by the midges small lumps develop in the skin and because they are intensely itchy the horse rubs itself, causing loss of hair and irritating the skin. Serum oozes from the irritated skin and scabs form. In chronic cases the skin becomes thickened and corrugated. The horse will attempt to rub themselves on anything that is available, including you!

The appearance of the skin is distinctive, but other diseases that can look similar include ringworm, tail itch, bites from stable or buffalo flies, and rain scald. Queensland itch is very common in northern Australia, roughly from Taree, NSW north, although there are pockets with appropriate climatic conditions further south than this.

'Queensland Itch' is mainly a summer problem although in some areas the midges are around nearly all year. It is particularly bad in areas where there is a quantity of still, stagnant water for the midges to breed in.

If you are unsure whether your horse has 'Queensland Itch' or some other skin condition, consult with your veterinarian for advice. Provide temporary relief of the skin irritation by applying calamine lotion or anti-inflammatory creams. Your vet may need to give an anti-inflammatory or antihistamine injection.



Itchy horses will rub themselves on anything in the area.

Please remember

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This older horse, an Itch sufferer for years although reasonably lightly affected is able to gain relief (and have fun!!) by wearing a thin cotton rug. Some horses are much more affected by the itch.

Paddocked horses on large properties are difficult to treat. Many remedies have been used with variable success. Non-irritant, oil-based compounds may help because they have a sedative effect on skin and also act as a barrier to the midge. However care must be taken when using them in hot weather as the oil content can burn the horse. Residual insecticides, such as the synthetic pyrethroid-type sprays, can be used, but remember that rain will reduce the effectiveness of sprays and local treatment.

In the long term midge control measures are needed because susceptible horses are usually affected annually. Ensure that stagnant water is drained or kept moving if possible (midges breed in stagnant water). Increase vegetation

on your property that provides habitat for wildlife that will in turn eat pest insects (certain insectivorous birds and bats (not fruit bats) eat thousands of insects a day per animal) (see our publication [Manure, water and vegetation on a horse property \(2011\)](#)).

Ideally, keep these horses in insect-proof stables at the times of greatest midge activity (late afternoon and early morning). A fan in the stable will help to keep the midges away (midges are not strong enough to be able to fly in the strong breeze created by the fan). A lightweight 'cotton' rug (these rugs are called cotton but are actually a mix of cotton and man-made fibres) is a must if the horse is to be outside during the late afternoon and early morning. Be very careful if using a hood as the horse will have a much higher than normal tendency to rub the head and the hood can slip over the eyes. This may lead to a serious accident.

If the horse is to be rehomed or sold at any time aim to relocate the horse south to an area that is not affected. Also be aware when bringing horses in from unaffected areas that they may develop 'the itch'. Queensland Itch is a miserable condition for horses

and it is not fair to let horses suffer unnecessarily. Never just ignore the condition, always seek expert advice.



Horses should be allowed to lead as 'natural' a life as possible. If possible a life without rugs is best and this may mean the horse being relocated to an itch free area if they are badly affected by Queensland Itch.

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