

What is Urticaria?

Urticaria or more commonly known as “hives” is a nodular skin disease affecting horses that may cause wheals (the bumps on the surface of their skin), edema and itching. This is most often caused by a Type 1 hypersensitivity reaction, and can be due to factors such as heat, sunlight, exercise, food allergy, insect bites, topical parasiticides, plants, soap, vaccines, or snake bites. One of the most common reasons for hives is hypersensitivity to insect bites.

The appearance of the lesion may come on slowly or rapidly depending on the cause. The lesions are likely to be soft, round, 1-20 cm in diameter with a depression at the center of the lesion, and may or may not have serous exudate (drainage). The lesions may or may not cause the horse to be itchy. The site for the lesions may be localized to one place on the horse or can be generalized, meaning the hives are spread all over the horse’s body.

Commonly, we are unable to pinpoint the cause of urticaria, especially if it is an isolated incident. If hives are a chronic or recurring problem, it is essential for the owner to determine if the hives are associated with a specific environmental factor. Questions to ask regarding hives include: Does it occur after feeding the horse or giving the horse a certain treat? Is there an outbreak of hives after applying a type of fly spray or topical medication? Do the hives resolve within 12-24 hours after the horse is moved to a different environment (stall vs. pasture vs. paddock)? Does an outbreak of hives occur after bathing or cleaning tack with a particular soap?

If the owner cannot correlate chronic episodes of hives to a specific environmental change or exposure a food trial may be suggested by your veterinarian. The horse should also be moved to a different environment with good insect control for at least one week during the food trial. If the hives persist an intradermal skin test may need to be performed to rule out common environmental allergens that could be affecting your horse.

Treatment is usually designed to remove the inciting cause for the urticaria. Occasionally if the horse has a severe allergic reaction swelling of the throat can impair respiratory function; if this is observed, it is imperative that you contact your veterinarian immediately. However, most cases of acute urticaria do not need to be treated. If insect hypersensitivity is suspected use water based fly repellent, use fans in stalls, fly sheets, and stall or paddock

cleaning as often as possible. If the cause of the urticaria is unknown your veterinarian may recommend short-term steroids and/or antihistamines.

Anne Ray, DVM

Intern at Arizona Equine Medical and Surgical Centre
Gilbert, AZ