

## Hives

Hives are variable-sized patches of edema (swelling) that can occur anywhere on the body, especially on the neck, sides of the body, and upper areas of the limbs. They may or may not be itchy and cause discomfort to the horse. Hives are common in horses but the cause is often difficult to determine. They can be caused by hypersensitivity or allergic reactions, insect bites and stings, physical forces (pressure, sunlight, heat, cold, exercise), physiologic stresses, genetic abnormalities, drugs and chemicals, infections, plants, and foods to name a few. The most commonly reported causes of hives in horses are drugs (especially penicillin), feedstuffs, atopy (genetically predisposed hypersensitivity to environmental allergens), and secondary to infections or parasite infestations.

Careful assessment of the filly's history and environment may help determine a likely diagnosis. Keeping a journal of the filly's condition, activities, and exposures (to feed, bedding, grooming and cleaning supplies, turnout, etc) may help create a list of possible causes. A seasonal recurrence of hives suggests insects (summer), exposure to airborne allergens (winter or summer), seasonal food items (winter or summer), or cold (winter). Was the episode of hives preceded by administration of a drug, vaccination, dewormer, or feed change? Do the hives occur when the filly is indoors, outdoors, or both? Does a specific activity such as exercise, feeding, bedding the stall, applying fly spray, etc, precede an episode? These are some of the questions that can be asked to help limit the list of possible causes.

A biopsy of one of the bumps can confirm the presence of hives but it cannot confirm a cause. Allergy testing can be performed to try to identify substances a horse is allergic to, including feeds, bedding, molds, pollens, insects, trees, and regional inhalants. Two types of allergy testing are available for horses. Intradermal or skin testing involves injecting a small amount of each allergen into the skin of the horse and observing for the presence of a reaction (production of hives) and the severity of that reaction (size of the hives). Serum testing involves taking a sample of the allergic horse's blood and measuring the amount of allergen-specific antibody (IgE) present in the serum. Results can vary and need to be interpreted carefully. Skin testing is more specialized and usually needs to be performed at a referral hospital but serum testing can be performed at the farm.

The information gained from allergy testing can provide a guide for treatment. First, it provides a list of substances for elimination and avoidance studies.

When possible, individual reactive items are removed from the horse's diet, environment, etc one at a time and the horse is monitored for hives. Secondly, specific hyposensitization or allergy vaccines can be made based on a horse's test results for the purpose of desensitizing the horse to the allergy-causing substances. In addition, the use of antihistamines and/or steroids can be used to manage allergic reactions in horses. In my experience, the most effective antihistamine in horses is hydroxyzine. It is often given orally 1-2x/day for 1-2 months until the hives are controlled. Prednisolone and dexamethasone are the steroids of choice in horses. In chronic cases steroids may need to be administered carefully for a prolonged period of time. The dose is gradually decreased to avoid any adverse reactions. In some cases steroid and antihistamine therapy are combined. Acupuncture and homeopathic treatments have also been reported as effective therapy in horses with hives.

I recommend that you talk with your veterinarian about these treatment options to see which may be appropriate for your filly. If you are interested in skin allergy testing and are not far from Dover, New Hampshire, it is a service that we provide. We would be happy to discuss this case with you and work towards finding a cause and management plan for your filly.

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