

# Tysul Vets Equine Newsletter

## December 2015

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### Common poisonings part 2 – Plants and Shrubs by Sarah Mosley, BVSc, MRCVS

#### Ragwort



Found most commonly on roadsides and unmanaged pasture, a tall plant characterised by small yellow flowers. Each plant can produce 30,000 seeds a year hence the struggle to

control it once it's present. It contains a pyrrolizidine alkaloid which damages the liver. Generally the build up of toxicity over time leads to liver failure, secondary photosensitisation, nervous problems (such as head pressing and aimless walking due to the build up of ammonia in the blood) and breathing problems (due to laryngeal paralysis). If ingested in large amounts, acute toxicity can occur. If present, strict removal needs to be undertaken and there is legislation to encourage councils to combat the presence of ragwort on road verges. Generally horses will stay away from ragwort when ample grazing is available, however, will ingest the toxin when seedlings are blown onto pasture or when the dried plant is caught up in hay. Prognosis is very poor once clinical signs are evident and treatment is limited.



#### Foxglove/Oleander/Rhododendron



These contain toxins known as cardiac glycosides such as digitalis. They disrupt the electrical conductivity of the heart causing arrhythmias and circulatory disturbances, often preceding death. Lethal doses can be as little as 30-40 leaves and signs develop within hours of ingestion. In cases of known toxicity, before signs develop, attempts can be made to reduce absorption from the digestive tract and cardiac anti-arrhythmic drugs can be used, however the chance to treat is usually missed.

#### Deadly nightshade



Again, like ragwort, it is distasteful to horses but is ingested when grazing is sparse or when leaves fall onto the pasture. The compound atropine is responsible for the clinical signs of dilated pupils, increased heart rate, nervous signs, gastro-intestinal problems and sometimes death. If suspected, neostigmine can be used to reverse clinical signs if they are not too severe.

#### Water Hemlock



Often found on poorly drained soils, with a similar appearance to cow parsley but with thicker, purple tinged stalks. It contains short chained alcohols called cicutoxin and cicutol which are found in the root of this plant. Hence if digging or pulling it up, you must take care and wear gloves. The use of herbicides is often a better method of control. The onset of clinical signs is very quick and seizure activity may be seen prior to death. Some cases can recover, if an animal survives for 8 hours with nervous signs, they have a favourable prognosis. Sedation and a calm environment can be used to try to reduce seizure activity.



#### Bracken



7% of the UK's surface area is covered in bracken with it being one of the 5 most abundant plants in the world. Toxicity often occurs after the build up of ingestion over weeks to months. It contains thiaminase (which deactivates vitamin B1) and causes neurological signs such as depression, anorexia, ataxia, tremors and in severe cases seizures. In the less severe cases, supplementation with vitamin B1 can allow a full recovery. **(Continued next page)**



## St Johns Wort



This is a herbaceous plant that produces golden yellow flowers and it is an abundant weed throughout the UK. The toxic substance is hypericin, a

photodynamic agent which, when in the skin, reacts with UV light causing photosensitisation, resulting in sun burn lesions. Clinical signs usually develop 1-21 days post ingestion and fresh shoots are attractive to horses as well as remaining toxic when dried in hay.

## Weight Loss by Sarah Mosley, BVSc, MRCVS

Weight loss is a common worry to owners of elderly horses and ponies during the winter months, however there are many possible causes and it can affect animals at any age.

**There are four possible mechanisms for weight loss:**

- 1. Reduced intake** - e.g. inappropriate diet, inability to get to feed or an overpowering competition for feed, dental problems and problems swallowing
- 2. Reduced digestion or absorption of food** - e.g. dental problems, liver disease, malabsorption problems (caused by parasites, infiltrative or inflammatory bowel disease, enzyme deficiencies and neoplasia)
- 3. Increased losses** - e.g. a protein losing enteropathy or neuropathy, peritonitis and pleuritis
- 4. Increased requirements** - e.g. pregnancy, lactation and systemic disease

**The most common causes being:**

Malnutrition, parasitism, dental problems, liver problems, Cushing's syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, neoplasia and an inability to get to or compete for feed e.g. lameness, bullying or visual problems

Hence it is important to make provision of supplementary feeds if grazing is sparse or work load is increased, to have an effective worming schedule in place (see previous newsletters online for further information), to book regular dental checks (as a rule, these should be done at least annually) and to organise a veterinary examination if you suspect any problems which can lead to weight loss e.g. inappetence, diarrhoea, lameness, a hairy coat and pot bellied appearance, colic signs, quidding, general ill thrift, etc.



Often further tests are indicated e.g. a faecal egg count and tapeworm elisa to screen for parasites, and blood samples to screen for Cushing's and liver disease. It is generally advisable to run a more comprehensive blood screen to check red and white blood cell parameters, protein and inflammatory marker levels, other organ enzymes and electrolyte levels, as these can give an insight into the scale of the problem and prognosis, the possibility of concurrent disease and an indication for further tests if a less common cause is suspected.

**Other causes for weight loss which are seen less commonly but worth considering are:**

Kidney problems, heart problems, chronic chest problems, abdominal abscesses, chronic diarrhoea and equine grass sickness.

Some of the causes can be hard to diagnose and require specialist diagnostics to confirm, for example, an electro or echocardiogram for a heart problem, an abdominal or thoracic ultrasound with or without a sample of fluid or a structure being taken, rectal biopsies, gastroscopy for concurrent stomach ulcers which may be suppressing appetite or an oral glucose absorption test, etc.

However, around 90% of weight loss cases are due to feeding, dental or parasite problems which can easily be rectified before considering these more comprehensive tests.

Horses' body weight can alter a little bit due to its age, season, diet, level of exercise and health status however it is important to consult a veterinarian earlier rather than later if weight loss continues or happens suddenly so that (if possible) the trend can be reversed before its condition becomes debilitated. Although weight loss can be a complex problem to solve and there are some life threatening or career ending causes, the vast majority carry a good prognosis especially those caused by feeding, dental and parasite problems, therefore investigation and treatment should not be shied away from.

*Nadolig Llawen i chi gyd | Happy  
Christmas to you all*

### Christmas Opening Hours

We will close at 3.00 pm on Christmas Eve

Closed - Christmas Day, Boxing Day (Saturday), Boxing Day  
(Monday) and New Years Day. -

Emergency services as usual on 01559 363318

From January 2016 our newsletters will no longer be posted out with bills unless requested. All newsletters will be available to pick up in reception or from our website.

[www.tysulvets.co.uk](http://www.tysulvets.co.uk)