

Poisonous plants - what to look out for



Pasture management is an important part of looking after your horse. You should regularly check your horse's grazing for poisonous plants. Many plants that are poisonous to horses cause neurological and liver damage which can be life-threatening.

Unless you have a good general knowledge of poisonous plants it is unlikely that you will be able to easily identify which plants are poisonous to your horse or not. There are some plants that you will be familiar with, eg ragwort, but others that you may not be familiar with, eg charlock. It is useful to familiarise yourself with the most common plants poisonous to horses so that if you see some in your horse's field you will know that it needs removing.

Which plants are poisonous to horses? Braken fern and Buttercup

Braken Fern

Causes: weight loss, staggering, nervousness, muscle twitching, seizures.

Notes:

Life-threatening if consumed for 1-2 months prior to manifesting clinical signs.

If not treated, death occurs in 2-10 days.

Horses can be treated if caught in time.

Buttercup

Causes: mouth ulceration/inflammation/blistering, swollen face, salivation, seizures.

Notes:

Can be life-threatening.

Clinical effects usually cause animal to stop eating, making the condition self-limiting.

Charlock and Cowbane

Charlock

Causes: frothing at the mouth, diarrhea, bloating, breathing difficulties.

Notes:

Can be life-threatening if eaten in large amounts.

Death by asphyxia within 1-2 hours.

Cowbane

Causes: salivation, dilated pupils, convulsions, colic.

Notes:

Life-threatening.

Can be fatal within a few hours of ingestion.

Survival of the first few hours after ingestion, however, can mean recovery in a few days.

Considered to be an extremely dangerous plant.

Picture shows flowering Cowbane.

Foxglove and Hemlock

Foxglove

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Causes: irregular heart beat/heart failure, diarrhea, abdominal pain, convulsions, drowsiness.

Notes:

Can be life-threatening.

Usually only eaten if found in hay.

Hemlock

Causes: paralysis, convulsions.

Notes:

Life-threatening.

Death through respiratory paralysis.

Horsetail and Laburnum

Horsetail

Causes: incoordination, tremors, cardiac problems, kidney damage.

Notes:

Life-threatening if left untreated.

Common cause of serious or fatal poisoning in horses.

Laburnum

Causes: diarrhea, salivation, incoordination, colic, convulsions, dilated pupils.

Notes:

Life-threatening if consumed in large quantities.

Monkshood and Oak

Monkshood

Causes: colic, paralysis, respiratory and circulatory compromise.

Notes:

Life-threatening.

If consumed in large amounts poisoning leads to sudden death from asphyxia and circulatory collapse.

Risk of poisoning however is small, as the plant is rare.

Reputed to be one of the United Kingdom's most poisonous plants.

Oak

Causes: colic, liver damage, depression, blood in urine, incoordination, mouth ulcers.

Notes:

Can be life-threatening.

Horses can become addicted to the leaves and acorns and will actively search them out!

Potato and Privet

Potato

Causes: gastrointestinal/circulatory compromise, weak pulse, incoordination, restlessness, convulsions.

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Notes:

Can be life-threatening.

Poisoning is caused by the eating of decayed, sprouted or green tubers.

The related tomato plant may also be toxic.

Privet

Causes: staggering, gastrointestinal compromise, paralysis, dilated pupils, diarrhea, incoordination, convulsions.

Notes:

Life-threatening.

Death can occur within 4-48 h after ingestion.

Ragwort

Causes: loss of weight and condition, jaundice, photosensitive dermatitis, depression, loss of appetite, colic, restlessness, incoordination, paralysis, head-pressing, permanent nervous injury.

Notes:

Life-threatening.

Liver damage builds on itself over time.

Symptoms of poisoning may not be apparent until as much as 75% of the liver has been damaged.

Common cause of serious or fatal poisoning in horses.

Ragwort is bitter-tasting so is usually avoided unless grazing is in short supply.

In the United Kingdom, Ragwort is classified as injurious by the 1959 Weed Act - it is an offence to allow it to spread.

Yew

Causes: incoordination, tremors, rapid then weak pulse, excitability followed by collapse, acute heart failure.

Notes:

Life-threatening.

In many cases there are no signs, acute heart failure leading to death within a few hours.

What should I do if I find a poisonous plant in my horse's field?

The most common plant poisoning in horses is caused by ragwort, yew, laburnum, oak and bracken fern. If you find any plants in your horse's field you believe to be poisonous they should be removed immediately. The plant should be completely removed from the roots to avoid it from re-growing. Avoid using chemicals or herbicides, unless you are able to keep your horse in another field while the other is rested for a few weeks. Fence off any trees, eg oak, if possible and collect up acorns if they fall within reach of your horse. Do not leave any dead plants where animals can get to them as some will still be poisonous once they are dead and have dried out. The easiest way to dispose of any plants you remove from your horse's field is to burn them.

What should I do if my horse eats a poisonous plant?

Many plants are toxic and if a horse is suspected of having ingested toxic herbage, veterinary help should be sought without delay. Horses may suffer mild toxic effects unnoticed by you or your vet, however, reported cases of fatality by plant poisoning are rare; most toxic plants are too pungent or bitter for the horse to digest, unless he has a craving, in the case of oak or is exceptionally hungry. Fatalities are common where irreversible damage has been caused by ingestion of large quantities, or ingestion over a

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long period of time. If you are ever unsure or see any signs of poisoning in your horse, call your veterinarian immediately.

What else should I know?

Many poisonings occur when horses eat ornamental shrubs over a fence line. Be sure to talk to any neighbours and others who may unknowingly plant dangerous trees and shrubs too close to your pastures or who might even dump fresh cutting and clippings over the fence for your horse thinking they are providing a treat.

Be cautious immediately after heavy winds and storms. Trees and shrubs may get damaged and branches knocked down into your horse's field. Some plants are more toxic after they wilt and your horse may eat the leaves from a dropped branch even though they have been in that pasture and never touched that particular tree previously.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.