

HORSE OWNERS – BEWARE OF THESE PLANTS!

While it is great to see the rain (though not so good for the harvest), there are downsides to seeing such lush growth. Last month we discussed the problem of grass seeds, especially in dogs and cats. Another problem is plants that are poisonous when they are eaten, with horses particularly susceptible.

This spring has been a great season for Paterson's curse with lots of pretty purple paddocks around. However, Paterson's curse contains a toxin called pyrrolizidine alkaloids that causes severe liver damage in horses. Many other plants (such as rattlepods, fireweed, ragwort and heliotrope) contain the same toxin. Signs of Paterson's curse toxicity include depression, jaundice (yellow gums), food refusal, colic, loss of condition, photosensitisation (like sunburn) progressing to head pressing and aimless wandering. There is no cure for liver disease – treatment is aimed at supporting the horse's body while it heals itself, using fluids, vitamins and antibiotics. The horse should be removed from the toxic pasture and placed on a low-protein high energy diet (e.g. grassy/oaten hay or chaff and beet pulp with molasses).

Lush green grass can also cause colic and laminitis (founder) in horses. LHPA district vet Bruce Watt discussed laminitis a month or so ago but the continued rainfall has served to extend the normal risk period. Ponies (especially if old or overweight) and horses with a history of laminitis should be kept off lush green grass and clover. The popular feed supplement "Foundergard" (containing virginiamycin) can help to lessen the risk of laminitis developing, but is not effective in treating horses that have already developed laminitis. Treatment of laminitis is more supportive than curative, involving pain relief, corrective shoeing, soft footing and time.

A big no-no for most species, including horses (and humans!), is oleander which can cause sudden death after the ingestion of as little as a few leaves. Oleander contains a toxin called cardiac glycoside, which is also found in mother of millions, cotton bush and foxglove.

Flatweeds (such as cats ear and possibly dandelions) can cause a condition known as Australian stringhalt which is characterised by exaggerated and involuntary flexion of the hind limbs (goose stepping). The long nerves that supply the legs are damaged by the toxin (which has not been identified) which can result in muscle wastage. Horses will usually recover if access to the weeds is removed, but the recovery can take several months.

Kikuyu is one of a number of introduced tropical grasses (including buffel grass and setaria) that have been associated with "big head" in horses. Big head occurs when the oxalates found in these grasses form insoluble crystals with calcium in the horse's diet. This causes the horse to suffer from a calcium deficiency meaning the bones become soft, resulting in shifting lameness and swollen jaw bones. Removing the horse from the kikuyu pasture will usually resolve the problem. The problem can be avoided by ensuring that horses do not graze pastures dominated by kikuyu etc for more than a month at a time, particularly when the grasses are rapidly growing. Adding legumes, rye grass or native grasses to the pasture will also help to reduce the risk.

Less well known is the possibility of horses being poisoned by white cedar trees. Thankfully however the leaves and fruit are bitter and unpalatable, so as long as your horse has almost any other feed available, they would be unlikely to ingest the toxic white cedar. Signs of toxicity include diarrhoea, colic, salivation, incoordination and excited behaviour, leading to depression, seizures and paralysis. If you have these trees on your property, try to keep young horses away from them as they may be more likely to experiment with new tastes.

If you need any help or advice on how toxic plants can affect your animals, please contact the friendly team at Cowra Veterinary Centre.