

VET DIARY

Field trip

Our regular columnist, equine vet **Nicola Thompson**, offers smart advice to help keep your horse safe in his paddock

Lots of my clients worry about the risk of injury to their horses when travelling or being ridden, but many of the equine patients I see have hurt themselves in the field.

It's well known that horses have a 'flight or fight' response, and this is why they may spook out on a hack. It's something my pony would use an excuse to avoid performing a few dressage movements!

Horses also display the 'flight' response out in a field if they are worried or scared about something.

Unfortunately, horses and ponies don't think rationally when frightened – they just run and don't always look where they are going.

This is why we need to be so careful what objects are left in paddocks and fields where horses are grazed.

Every year horses hurt themselves on things such as fence posts and loose barbed wire, and other objects left in fields, such as trailers.

Be sure that your horse's field is clear of machinery and rubbish. If it has to be there, keep horses away from it by using electric fencing.

The only problem with electric fencing is that some horses don't respect it unless it is energised.

Also, if it gets wrapped around the legs it can act like cheese wire and slice through skin, tendon and muscle.

So, although it is very useful and I use with my own horses, I make sure it is switched on.

Electric fencing shouldn't be used on its own for the perimeter of a field.

Wire wounds

Wire fencing is commonly used but it is something else that can cause damage if horses get tangled up in it.

Barbed wire especially is nasty stuff and can result in horrific injuries. It can also rip your rugs if horses get too close.

The best fencing for horses has always been considered to be solid post and rail fencing with a hedge behind it.

I agree with this, but most people don't have hedges, so a well-built post and rail fence would be my recommendation.

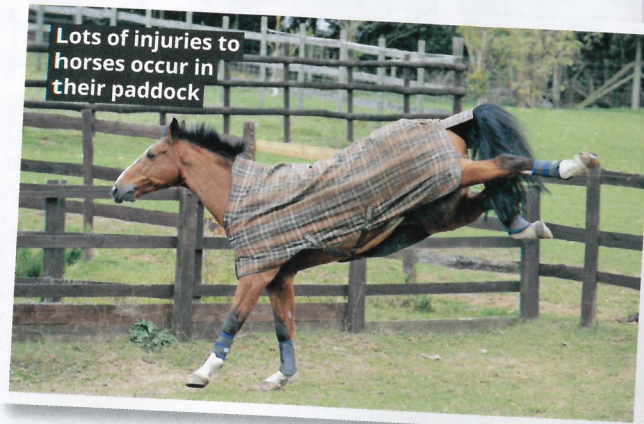
However, as I'm sure many of you know, it is expensive and not practical for everyone. So, electric fencing is a good option to make smaller paddocks or reinforce fences.

Remove ragwort by the roots before the plant flowers



OUR EXPERT

Nicola Thompson is a qualified vet who works for Wright & Moreton in Cheshire, a member practice of XL Equine. She has ridden since she was a child.



Poisonous plants

Other things to look out for in your horse's field are poisonous plants. The most common is ragwort, which is pretty distinctive with its bright yellow flowers.

Ragwort causes liver disease in most species of mammal but horses are more often affected as it is palatable to them when the plant is dead and dried.

They will also eat the 'live' plant if there isn't any grass available, so always pull or dig it up, making sure you remove the roots.

Other poisonous plants are yew trees, foxgloves and acorns. They are poisonous to different degrees – one acorn won't hurt a horse but a mouthful of yew could be deadly.

If you want more information on poisonous plants, you can find a lot online or ask your vet for advice.

A good place to get tips on pasture management is from the British Horse Society's website (www.bhs.org.uk). Its welfare section is a great source of practical information.

I see quite a lot of pasture related injuries and illnesses and some of these could have been prevented. Therefore, it's worth taking care to be vigilant and make regular checks in order to keep your horse healthy. ■

Next issue: Equine vet Nicola talks about her experiences of out-of-hours call outs.