

# VET DIARY



## 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.

## The hardest decision

Our vet columnist **Nicola Thompson** considers the times owners have to make a tough decision about a horse's future

It has been a busy summer for riders, with many enjoying a packed schedule of shows. After a bit of a break, I've got back in the saddle myself and have loved it.

Sadly, not everyone will have been able to spend a summer of fun with their horse, due to injury or illness.

One of my clients had to make a difficult decision to euthanize their horse, after he fell ill with grass sickness.

Grass sickness is a rare but devastating disease which most commonly affects horses aged between two and seven years, that graze for at least part of the day.

It damages the nerves in the intestines and stomach, causing partial or complete paralysis of the intestinal tract.

The cause has never been identified and so prevention is currently not possible.

Horses suffering from grass sickness go downhill quickly and there is often little vets can do.

### A tricky diagnosis

Another problem is the lack of a blood test or scan which gives a clear grass sickness diagnosis. Samples of gut can be analysed but this requires major surgery.



Some horses exhibit similar signs to colic

Therefore, the disease is often diagnosed on the symptoms a horse is showing.

Some cases can be confused with severe, sudden colic – the horses have a high heart rate, poor gut movement and are in a lot of pain. They can also have patchy sweat and muscle tremors.

Others may develop symptoms over a longer time and are less painful. They lose

**"The cause of grass sickness has never been identified so prevention is not possible"**

weight, have difficulty swallowing and often get impactions in their intestines.

More common signs are incoordination and standing with all feet close together.

Some horses survive but only those not in pain, who show interest in life and will eat small amounts are suitable candidates for treatment. They need palatable, high-energy, easily swallowed food and nursing is intensive, especially in the early stages.

The case I treated initially had mild colic signs – dullness and lack of appetite. This five-year-old gelding had regular turnout and was previously fit and healthy.

At first, he could swallow normally but showed little interest in food. He initially responded to medication for pain relief and gut spasms, then lost weight dramatically and had difficulty swallowing.

His appetite became poor and he would mostly only nibble at grass. He also had a high heart rate.

Over the course of a week he showed incoordination, muscle tremors and patchy sweating. He also had several



Grass sickness sufferers stand with their feet together

episodes of colic, which only partially responded to pain medication. After a long discussion about his prognosis, the owner opted to put him to sleep.

### Putting the horse first

The decision to euthanize a horse is hard. Sometimes it happens because of a disease that is not treatable. Or, it can be due to a longer-term issue, such as lameness or laminitis, or because of old age.

Because it is hard to let go, you may be tempted to keep going with treatment, but you have to weigh up the horse's quality of life, and the probability of them improving.

I keep owners updated with further treatment options and the prognosis.

But sometimes we run out of options and euthanasia is the right thing for the horse's welfare.

For someone who became a vet to help 'fix' horses, it can feel like failure. I have to remind myself I am ending the pain and this helps me come to terms with it.

In some cases – like the horse with grass sickness – it really is the only kind option. ■

**NEXT ISSUE** Our regular vet writer Nicola discusses the issue of ragwort and liver disease.