

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 regeneration game

Our regular vet writer Nicola Thompson considers liver disease and how it can affect horses differently

Two of my equine patients have been suffering from liver problems, but in each case the symptoms were different, as were the causes and outcomes.

The liver has many functions, but one of its most important roles is as a detoxifying centre. Therefore, liver disease causes a build up of toxins in the blood.

It produces a variety of signs including incoordination, yawning excessively and yellowing of the gums and the whites of the eyes.

Long-term liver damage leads to weight loss and a reduced appetite and can cause discomfort, so the horse may display signs of mild colic.

What's unusual about this organ is it can regenerate and repair itself – to an extent.

Same disease, different signs

The first horse with liver disease was PJ, a 27-year-old, retired, part-Arab gelding. He had been losing weight over a few months and didn't seem himself.

His owner put this down to old age, and coming out of winter a bit poor. However, he suddenly became lethargic, went off his food and was unsteady on his feet.

He was also yawning excessively and pressing his head into the stable wall.

My second case was Flicka, a five-year-old, coloured cob mare. I went to see her as an emergency colic call, but it was not a typical colic. She was sweating, breathing rapidly and staggering around her stable.

On examination, she had a high heart rate, a fever and a yellow colouring to the whites of her eyes.

Both horses were administered anti-inflammatories, antibiotics and a liver support. Blood samples indicated Flicka was suffering from liver damage.

In PJ's case we also took biopsies of the liver and carried out an ultrasound scan. The tests showed advanced damage to the organ, with lots of scar tissue. The damage was a distinctive type only seen with ragwort poisoning. The liver cannot heal this damage.

Flicka had signs of an infection on her tests. We didn't perform a biopsy or a scan due to costs.



“What's unusual about the liver is it can regenerate and repair itself – to an extent”

She stayed on antibiotics and steroids for three weeks, improving dramatically over the first 24 hours and then returning to normal.

PJ has done well with treatment but struggles to gain weight and will always need medication. All we have managed to do is hold the disease at bay and, in time, his liver will most likely get worse.

Flicka's liver damage was caused by a bacterial infection. The damage in her case was reversible, with the liver being able to regenerate.



Remove ragwort

The two cases show that liver disease can show itself in different ways and that the outcome can vary.

The most important lesson is a lot of the more serious cases can be prevented, by removing and destroying ragwort.

Ragwort isn't something most horses choose to eat but if it's dead and dried they will. Horses on poor pasture with lots of ragwort may have no choice but to eat it.

A lot of people don't realise that damage can occur when a horse is young, yet the signs may not appear for several years.

It is so important that ragwort is removed from fields by pulling it up and burning it, and this should reduce the number of cases of liver damage we see.

Not only would this outcome make me very happy, it would prevent a lot of distress for horses and their owners. ■

NEXT ISSUE Nicola discusses the issues that she commonly sees in older equine patients.