



Ragwort has bright yellow flowers (above) and frilly green leaves (below left)



After flowering, the plant dies and seeds are dispersed

The dangers of ragwort

Your horse could be suffering from ragwort poisoning and you may not even know! XL Equine vets explain what to look out for and how to protect your horse from this deadly weed

Ragwort is a very common plant with yellow flowers, which is highly poisonous to horses. It's often seen growing on rough land and roadside verges, and can also be found on pasture, particularly on overgrazed and 'starvation' paddocks.

When it's growing, it is generally unpalatable to horses, although some have been known to eat it, but when wilted or dried in hay, it loses its bitter taste and will readily be eaten. Unfortunately, though, it retains its toxic properties even when dry.

The toxins in ragwort damage the liver and signs of this damage are often only seen months or years after the plants have been eaten. The liver is able to continue to function normally until at least half of it is damaged, so the damage is often advanced before signs are seen.

Permanent damage

Unfortunately, there is no specific treatment or antidote that will cure the disease or reverse the damage to the liver. Treatment is aimed at minimising the work the liver has to do and supportive therapy. The patient may respond to treatment if they are diagnosed early enough.

The diet can be altered to contain low but adequate levels of good-quality, easily digestible protein to prevent the overproduction of ammonia. A good diet for most cases of ragwort poisoning is a combination of two-parts sugar beet to one-part maize or barley, fed in six small meals a day, plus ad lib grass or hay.

Dietary vitamin supplementation can help to support the liver, but care must be taken because high levels of iron, vitamin A, niacin, valerian and comfrey can all further damage the liver. Milk

thistle has been shown to be useful in supporting liver function.

How to prevent it

The damage isn't reversible, but ragwort poisoning is something we can all take preventative measures against. And there are key things to consider...

- Removing ragwort from pasture prior to it seeding will prevent the spread of the plants.
- Plants are best dug out or levered out using a specially-designed fork, then removed and burned.
- The toxins can be absorbed through human skin, so gloves must be worn whenever handling the plants.
- Broad leaf herbicides can be used, but avoid making hay for one month after use to allow the ragwort to die fully.
- Make every attempt to ensure that your horse's hay or haylage does not contain ragwort.
- Grazing with sheep may help, as they are less susceptible and will graze off the young shoots in spring.
- Good grassland management can help – overgrazed land creates spaces for ragwort to grow.
- Routine blood screens can provide an early warning of disease.



Sheep will help graze off young shoots

Key points to remember

- Prevention of ragwort poisoning is far better than cure.
- The toxin accumulates after low-level ingestion over months or years.
- The plant is usually unpalatable, but palatability increases when cut or dried.
- Either spray or pull up and burn all ragwort on pasture.
- Purchase hay and haylage from reliable sources.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

XL Equine is a group of 35 independently owned equine veterinary practices who work together. To find out more about ragwort poisoning, and other treatments and conditions, visit xlequine.co.uk

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Signs of poisoning



Ragwort poisoning can be caused by low levels of toxins ingested over a long period of time, so there can be a delay of months or years from exposure to ragwort before symptoms start to develop. The signs of liver damage are varied and often non-specific, but include...

- jaundice (yellow discolouration of the gums and eyes).
- depression.
- weight loss and poor appetite.
- low-grade colic and/or diarrhoea
- oedema (fluid retention in the legs and under the belly).
- photosensitisation (the pink areas of the skin can become red and blistered with normal levels of exposure to sunlight).
- behavioural signs, such as disorientation, circling, repeated yawning and pressing the head against the wall.
- increased thirst.
- bleeding disorders.



Ragwort poisoning can cause photosensitisation

Many of these symptoms are caused by the liver's failure to detoxify the natural by-products of digestion and metabolism. Blood samples can show indicators of liver damage and reduced liver function, but diagnosis can be confirmed with an ultrasound scan and liver biopsy.



A scan can confirm poisoning