

Grass sickness explained



This dreaded disease often proves fatal and is feared for very good reason. John Brentnall, from Severn Edge Equine Vets, explains the latest on this condition



Grass sickness leads to sudden weight loss. This sufferer, Whinnie, owned by YH reader Sam Luther, became skin and bone after the disease struck

The condition

Grass sickness is a disease that attacks the nervous system, causing damage to the sections of this system that control involuntary functions, such as gut movement. It may lead to full or partial paralysis of the digestive tract, from the oesophagus to the rectum, and can affect all breeds

of horses, ponies and donkeys.

There are three forms of the disease - acute, sub-acute and chronic - with 95% of cases falling into the acute or sub-acute category (the most severe forms). If a horse is affected by either of these, euthanasia is the only option.

Chronic grass sickness is the mildest form, and the one with the highest

survival rate. Around 60% of chronically affected horses go on to make a full recovery following intensive nursing over a period of weeks or even months.

While the disease can affect horses of any age, from young foals up to veterans, most cases are seen in animals aged between two and seven.

With thanks to vet John Brentnall BVSc MRCVS and the team at Severn Edge Equine Vets for their help with this feature.

For more on the practice, call 01584 841080 or visit www.severnedgevets.co.uk

Symptoms & diagnosis

The main symptom of grass sickness is paralysis of the gut, which leads to severe weight loss and a tucked up appearance.

Pain may lead the horse to adopt an 'elephant standing on a tub' stance, with his feet tucked under his body (see pic, right) and, in acute cases, he may have trouble swallowing, with a nasal discharge of green stomach fluid.

The horse may also have a raised heartbeat and suffer muscle tremors, show colicky symptoms and have patchy sweating.

The signs for all three types of the disease - acute, sub-acute and chronic - overlap, with a lack of appetite and swift weight loss being the most obvious symptoms.

However, it's the speed with which



Affected horses can adopt the 'elephant on a tub' stance

these symptoms hit that's the main giveaway that this is something serious, especially in acute and sub-acute cases. Grass sickness strikes without warning, and the symptoms are frighteningly severe. At first, your vet may suspect colic, as many of the signs are similar, but the sudden onset of extreme weight loss and pain will soon point to something more sinister.

Prevention

While there's no way to prevent the disease as such, experts suggest good feeding and management practices may help to protect your horse from the disease. It's important his digestive system is working as efficiently as possible, so don't make any sudden changes to his diet, and feed lots of good quality forage all year round to help

stabilise his gut (the nutritional content of grass fluctuates, and feeding additional hay helps to balance this).

While the exact cause of grass sickness is unknown, research suggests it may be triggered by the release of toxins in the soil. These are produced by the bacterium clostridium botulinum, which is

fairly common in soil. While the vast majority of healthy horses may be exposed to such toxins with no ill-effects, and will develop a natural immunity, some will be in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

It's thought these toxins prey on horses with a weakened immune system, which is why younger horses or those who are stressed by a recent move

to a different yard appear most at risk as they're exposed to unfamiliar bacteria.

It's a good idea to regularly poo pick the field by hand, rather than using a mechanical system of removal that could disturb the earth. You should also avoid disturbing the soil by harrowing or letting it get too muddy and poached by over grazing, as this exposes the mud and may lead to toxins being released.

Treatment

There is no cure for grass sickness in its acute or sub-acute form, and the only treatment for chronic sufferers is intensive veterinary care and careful nursing. This involves a high-energy, high-protein diet that can be easily swallowed, as sufferers will be unwilling to eat. Your vet will prescribe painkillers, an appetite

stimulant and possibly probiotics to help boost gut health.

A pilot vaccine trial is currently underway which, if it proves successful, will offer horses immunity from the clostridium botulinum bacterium. This trial is being run by Dr Jo Ireland of the Animal Health Trust, alongside the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies at the University of

Edinburgh, and is currently recruiting horses and ponies. If your horse is stabled at a yard that's reported a case (or cases) of grass sickness within the past three years, he may be eligible to take part. Find out more on the Equine Grass Sickness Fund's website at www.grasssickness.org.uk. It's a charity set up to support research into the disease and raise awareness of the condition.



Intensive nursing and weeks of care are the only treatment options



If there's a local outbreak of grass sickness, avoid any affected paddocks

Grass sickness: the latest

- ✓ Research has shown that, while grass sickness is diagnosed throughout the year, cases tend to occur in spring and early summer, between April and July, with a peak in May and a smaller peak often seen in late autumn. A link has also been hinted at between grass sickness and the weather. Dry, cool weather (between 7-11°C) that lasts for around 10 days is thought to be a trigger factor.
- ✓ While it's still rare, Britain has the highest recorded number of grass sickness cases in the world, with more than 1,600 reported cases since 2000. Horses living in the eastern counties of the UK may be more at risk, though it's not known why. Indeed, grass sickness was first identified in eastern Scotland more than a century ago.
- ✓ If a case of grass sickness has been recently diagnosed in your local area, be vigilant. Don't allow your horse to graze a field where affected horses have been turned out, and if the conditions are favourable for the disease (ie cool and dry for several days on the trot) consider stabling your horse until this changes.

CALL THE VET!

If your horse suffers signs of colic, sudden weight loss and appears to be in pain, ring your vet straight away and keep your horse as calm and comfortable as possible until he or she arrives. 📞