



December 2024

Winter health problems

Welcome to the December newsletter, we hope you all had a wonderful Christmas and we wish you all a very happy new year! We start with a grass sickness breakthrough and also continue our discussions on winter health problems.

Grass Sickness

Researchers at Edinburgh Vet School have identified the probable cause of equine grass sickness (EGS) and this new research is thought to be a “game changer” in understanding the disease and hopefully an important step towards reducing deaths caused by EGS. Experts believe they have found the neurotoxin responsible for causing EGS, which has been elusive for over 100 years. Research pinpoints a toxin with similar actions to snake venom toxins, produced by microorganisms in pasture.

The equine hospital’s Professor Bruce McGorum said: “Identifying a probable cause of equine grass sickness represents a significant breakthrough. We hope this discovery will lead to novel treatments and improved diagnostics for this devastating condition. Further work is under way to determine the source of this neurotoxin; it is likely to be produced by a microbe such as a bacterium or fungus that grows on grass during cold and dry weather, which typically occurs before cases of the disease are identified.”



Grass sickness is a frequently fatal condition that causes degenerative changes to the nervous system. In the study they found affected horses had major abnormalities in the nerves and muscles crucial for muscle function, and they believe this was caused by a neurotoxin similar to the toxin found in some snakes venom. They are hoping that drugs used to treat paralysis in people, caused by snake bites, could potentially be used to develop drugs to help the recovery of horses with grass sickness. There is currently no diagnostic or treatment options for horses with grass sickness with most being euthanised on humane grounds. We also have a higher prevalence of the disease in Scotland than the rest of the UK. This study is certainly very encouraging that in the future EGS may have a better outcome for affected horses.

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Hoof Abscesses

A sub-solar hoof abscess, also known as pus in the foot is a common cause of lameness, particularly in wet weather conditions following a long dry period, as well as during an extended spell of frequent and heavy rain. It is thought that tiny cracks appear in the hoof wall and allow moisture, dirt and bacteria to enter. Infection sets in, followed by a build-up of pus that, within the restricting hoof cavity, soon becomes extremely painful. Other cases are associated with puncture wounds to the hoof or via nails when being shod. Generally horses are very painful, often non-weight bearing and the foot will be hot and there will be a bounding digital pulse. Sometimes infection can track up the leg causing swelling higher up the leg. The abscess will need to be drained and then the foot poulticed to encourage drainage. We would recommend the horse goes onto bute to make them more comfy but usually once the abscess has drained horses are immediately comfier.



Pastern Dermatitis (Mud rash)

The wet winter weather and muddy fields irritate the horses skin making it more susceptible to both bacterial and fungal infections leading to pastern dermatitis. Pink skin under white hair is more sensitive, but dark skin can be affected too. Whatever the trigger, the skin will become red, crusty and scabby and the legs will become swollen. Sometimes the hair will fall off. In severe cases the horse will be lame. Long, “feathered” hair can act as a protecting waterproofing layer, unless it gets completely waterlogged or is infested with feather mites. There are many lotions and potions on the market that claim to be cures but the mainstay of treatment involves removing the horse from the wet and mud and keeping the legs as clean and dry as possible. Medicated shampoos or hibbi scrub can be used to try to get on top of any bacterial infection by gently lifting the scabs as long as the skin is then dried really thoroughly. Silver creams such as flamazine are excellent antimicrobials so can be helpful in getting on top of any infection. Generally we won’t use antibiotics unless all of the above have been tried and the mud rash is ongoing or if there is significant swelling on the legs. Prevention is definitely better than cure so keep legs clean and dry as far as possible.



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