



Ark Vet Centre

Equine Newsletter



❄️ February 2023 ❄️

Welcome to the February newsletter, we are now all looking forward to spring and have definitely noticed the lighter mornings and nights. Foaling season is now under way with the first foals of the season born and we know a lot of you will be thinking ahead to ride out season too! Looking ahead to spring we are discussing Grass Sickness as it is most prevalent in the spring time and we have over the years had cases in the area. It is an awful disease which can present in multiple different ways so we thought it was important to go over the main clinical signs so that it can be spotted early.

Grass sickness

Grass Sickness is a disease of horses, ponies and donkeys in which there is damage to parts of the nervous system which leads to gut paralysis. They have been investigating the disease for around 100 years but have still not found the cause, although the nature of the damage to the nervous system suggests that a type of toxin is involved.



The disease occurs almost exclusively in horses with access to grass and the greatest number of cases occurs in 2 to 7 year olds with a peak at 3 to 4 years, but can occur at any age. Cases occur in every month of the year but most are seen between April and July with a peak in May

A few factors have been shown to increase the risk of grass sickness:

- Stress e.g. Recent movement to a new yard
- Being overweight
- Cool dry weather (temperatures between 7-11°C)

www.arkvetcentre.co.uk

Grass sickness occurs in 3 forms. Acute, sub-acute and chronic. The major symptoms relate to partial or complete paralysis of the digestive tract from the oesophagus downwards. In acute grass sickness, the symptoms are severe, appear suddenly and the horse will die or require to be put to sleep within two days of the onset. Severe gut paralysis leads to signs of colic including rolling, pawing at the ground and looking at the flanks, difficulty in swallowing and drooling of saliva.

The stomach can become distended and stomach contents may pour down the nose. Further down the gut, constipation occurs. If any droppings are passed, they tend to be small, hard and may show a coating of mucus. Fine muscle tremors and patchy sweating may occur. In this form, the disease is fatal and the horse should be put to sleep once the diagnosis is made.



In subacute grass sickness, the symptoms are similar to those of the acute disease but are less severe. Small amounts of food may still be consumed. Such cases may die or require to be to sleep.

In chronic grass sickness, the symptoms come on more slowly and only some cases show mild, intermittent colic. The appetite is likely to be reduced and there will be varying degrees of difficulty in swallowing but salivation, accumulation of fluid in the stomach and severe constipation are not a feature. One of the major symptoms is rapid and severe weight loss.

These with intensive nursing at a hospital may live.

There is no diagnostic test so diagnosis is usually made based on clinical signs.

There is a huge amount of ongoing research into the disease so that we can try to develop prevention methods or new treatment options.



Find us on

