

Acorns

Acorns are poisonous to horses. This is because they contain toxic substances called Gallic Acid and Tannic Acid.

These acids can cause liver, kidney and intestinal damage to horses eating acorns, oak leaves or branches.

Acorn poisoning is rare but can be a particular problem in the autumn for horses allowed to graze near oak trees.



Acorns and horses

Different horses have varying degrees of tolerance to acorns. This means it is hard to accurately predict how an individual will be affected by them. Eating a few acorns will be unlikely to cause a problem, especially when combined with the normal high fibre grass / hay diet. However, some horses will develop a taste for acorns, and will actively seek them out. Consumption of acorns in larger amounts can lead to toxicity problems.

Clinical signs

It can be difficult to tell if your horse has only eaten a few acorns. Sometimes you will find the empty husks in their droppings.

Eating larger amounts will cause problems relating to liver and kidney damage or stomach/intestinal upsets. The signs may include:

- depression
- loss of appetite
- dehydration
- mouth ulcers
- colic
- constipation.

This may lead to more serious illness; severely affected horses develop diarrhoea, bloody urine and may become in- coordinated if the central nervous system is involved.

DIAGNOSIS

There is no specific diagnostic test so the most useful aid to diagnosis is known exposure to acorns. If your horse is unwell after known consumption of acorns, then contact your veterinary surgeon for advice immediately.

You might notice acorn husks in the droppings.

Your vet may be able to diagnose acorn toxicity based on the clinical signs.

KEY POINTS

- Acorns are poisonous to horses.
- Acorn poisoning is rare, but can be serious.
- The first sign you see may be acorn husks in the droppings.
- There is no specific antidote. Affected horses are treated symptomatically.
- Prevention is paramount. Horses should ideally be separated from oak trees during the autumn e.g. using electric fencing

Treatment

Acorn poisoning is very hard to treat as there is no specific antidote to the toxins. Patients are treated with supportive care, depending on the clinical signs and their severity in an effort to minimise any organ damage.

This may involve putting patients on intravenous fluid therapy to rehydrate them and support kidney function.

Laxatives and fluids/electrolytes may also be administered by mouth to try and soften the droppings and manage any constipation. If the patient is not drinking then this may be given by frequent stomach tubing.

Depending on the severity of illness, some patients may require hospitalisation for effective treatment to be undertaken. This would also allow for more effective monitoring and assessment of response to treatment.

PREVENTION

Don't let your horse graze underneath oak trees, particularly during the autumn, at times of acorn drop.

Don't allow your horse to eat oak leaves or branches. They also contain the toxins.

Fence off oak trees during the autumn to prevent access to acorns on the pasture.



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