

AN OWNER'S GUIDE TO ATYPICAL MYOPATHY

Atypical Myopathy (AM) is a very serious disease that causes rapid muscle destruction and unfortunately is often fatal. It affects grazing horses mainly in the Spring and Autumn. The disease affects horses of all types and breeds although it is more common in younger horses.

Symptoms

- lethargy
- muscle tremors
- stiffness/reluctance to move
- unable to lift head
- persistent lying down
- passing dark brown urine
- early signs may be confused with colic or laminitis



If you are worried that your horse might have atypical myopathy, please contact your vet as a matter of urgency.

Causes

Scientific research has identified a toxin called Hypoglycin A as the likely cause of atypical myopathy in horses. The toxin is found in the seeds of Sycamore trees (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), and it is thought that horses succumb to the disease through ingestion of the toxin in these seeds (known as 'helicopters'). Young saplings also contain this toxic substance in higher concentrations but as the saplings grow the level of Hypoglycin toxin they carry decreases.



Sycamore Seedling



Sycamore Saplings



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Treatment

Horses with atypical myopathy require intensive supportive veterinary and nursing care, despite this, atypical myopathy is still fatal in many cases. Prognosis is improved by early detection and instigation of treatment however once clinical signs of the disease are established prognosis is poor and mortality has been reported to be as high as 74-90%. Given the poor prognosis in some cases euthanasia is warranted.

Prevention

This latest research suggests that the risk of your horse getting atypical myopathy can be reduced by preventing access to sycamore seeds and saplings in the pasture, therefore, affected areas of pasture should be fenced off or preferably the seeds and saplings should be removed.

Once the saplings are cut they don't regrow and so the following management measures can be utilised to minimise the danger to your horse:

- Strip graze the pasture - confine the horses to the areas of the field less affected by the saplings. As the weeks go by, this can be relaxed as the pasture with higher amounts of saplings becomes less of a concern
- Mow the paddock then rest for a few days to allow the grass to come through
- Rest the pasture altogether until the summer when it will be safe!
- "Grazon" is a herbicide produced by Dow Agricultural Sciences which is effective against sycamore saplings. It is recommended the pasture should be rested for a week after spraying before being used again for grazing.