

Alsike Clover Poisoning in the Peace

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Every year we treat horses for alsike clover poisoning. It can be a very serious toxicosis and depending on the amount eaten can lead to the death of a horse. Not every horse on a pasture will be affected as some will selectively eat alsike clover over other forages.

Alsike clover contains a pyrrolizidine alkaloid that causes liver damage. Alsike can have a white, pink or red flower. It can be differentiated from red or white clover as alsike clover leaves do not usually have a white water mark and the flower stem originates from the main stem off the main stalk as separate leaflet stems. Unfortunately most of the clover you see in the peace area is alsike clover.

The most common symptoms that people see and are aware of are the sunburn or “photosensitization”. Often people think their horses have “scratches” as they get scabs and sores on the backs of their heels. The scabs are actually a result of sunburn and usually are seen on white feet. Sometimes white faces and noses will scab and peel and in severe cases, we have seen white patches on paint bodies burn and peel. Unfortunately this is just the surface and what is going on inside your horse as a result of the clover poisoning is much worse. Liver damage causes the symptoms that we see.

Not every horse will show photosensitisation, and not every horse has white skin. Another sign of clover poisoning is weight loss for no obvious reason. When the liver is damaged it cannot convert the digested products into the sugars that the body needs to survive. Sometimes we’ll also see horses that act a little bit colicky (like they have a stomach ache).

If the liver damage is severe the horse can develop encephalitis or brain swelling. These horses may show altered behaviour (sleepiness, aggression), are weak, and sometimes can have seizures.

Diagnosis is based on the symptoms, a history of clover in the diet, and blood work that demonstrates liver damage. Mucus membranes (gums) and the sclera (white area on the eyes) are often yellowish tinged. Unfortunately there is no magic treatment for liver damage so we do our best to make it easier for the liver to function. The liver is unique in that it has an amazing ability to regenerate itself, however if the liver is very severely damaged it may not be able to compensate. In severe cases horses can die.

If you suspect your horse is suffering from clover poisoning, contact your veterinarian. An important first step in treatment is to remove the source of the alsike clover. Take them off pasture or remove contaminated hay source. Feed grass hay, no clover or alfalfa as they are high in protein and create unnecessary work for the damaged liver. Get your horse out of the sunlight to minimize the damage to his skin. There are medicated creams available to help the skin heal and to treat any infections that might set into the damaged skin. At the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic we can provide some recipes and ideas for homemade diets to feed to horses with liver disease.

Pasture management is very important and often involves spraying to kill broad leaf plants. Some products have residual effects and can work for a few years. Consult with your agro chemical specialist about which product would work you. There is a common misconception that clover is fine once it is dry and in hay but it can still have toxic effects in this state. When buying hay inquire about clover and look through the bales.

If caught early the prognosis for most horses is great. More severe cases require a lot of TLC, supportive care and time to see if they will recover. Unfortunately alsike clover is growing all over the Peace Country. Please check your pasture and hay and watch for any signs of alsike clover poisoning in your horses. If you have any further questions about alsike clover poisoning or any other animal disease please drop by the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic and talk with one of our professional staff. www.dcvet.ca