



WorldHorseWelfare

**RAGWORT
ALERT**



A death sentence?

www.worldhorsewelfare.org/ragwort

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Imagine this: You stop eating. You get stomach pains. You're losing weight – fast. You have no energy. The sun hurts your skin. You lose co-ordination. You're struggling to breathe. Now you're going blind.

Worst of all, you can't tell anyone how bad you feel – and even if you could, it's too late for them to help you.

This is what you would experience if you were a horse suffering from liver failure as a result of ragwort poisoning.

Ragwort is poisonous to horses, damaging the liver when eaten.

The toxic effect builds up over time, causing irreparable damage. This means that your horse will get just as ill from eating small amounts of ragwort over a long period of time as it would do from eating a large quantity in one go.

Can you be certain that your horse hasn't eaten ragwort before you took over its care? An apparently healthy horse could already have serious liver damage from ragwort poisoning and may only need to eat a small amount more to trigger horrific symptoms.

One of the key things to remember is that there is often no sign of any problem until the condition has progressed so far that nothing can be done to treat it. In most cases the only reasonable course of action once the signs are visible is to have the horse put to sleep.

Liver failure is a horrible way for a horse to die. First they may become lethargic or behave abnormally. They can develop photosensitisation, where areas of pink skin become inflamed and painful when exposed to sunlight, like serious sunburn. They can also lose significant amounts of weight, even though they may be eating well.

Eventually they may go blind, have to fight for breath, start to wander or stagger or stand pushing their head against the wall. The symptoms and subsequent death can come about so quickly that owners have sometimes found their horse dead without warning.



Know your enemy: you must be able to recognise the plant so that you are able to remove it effectively.

It is vital that you ensure your horse doesn't eat ragwort, and you cannot assume that they will choose not to eat it.

Younger plants can taste less bitter than mature ones so it is possible that horses may consume ragwort without realising it.

It is widely accepted that the plant loses its unpleasant taste when it dies, but it is still just as dangerous. This means that ragwort found in hay or haylage, or leaves that have fallen off a plant in the field and died, can very easily be eaten unknowingly and will be just as harmful as a living plant.



Ragwort seedlings start to appear from autumn onwards. They are about 10-15mm high.



Rosettes can be found from early spring onwards.



Mature plants flower from May to October and can reach up to two metres in height.

After flowering, most of the plants die and the seeds germinate in the area where the mature plant was.

One plant can produce many thousands of seeds, which are covered with a downy substance so they can be easily dispersed by the prevailing wind. They can also be spread by water or by you and your animals.

A detailed description of ragwort is available to download as a podcast from the World Horse Welfare website:

www.worldhorsewelfare.org/ragwort

As a responsible owner, you must remove all ragwort from any areas your horse can access.

The plant is also harmful to humans, so it is essential to wear protective gloves and cover arms and legs when handling it. Ragwort should be removed before it flowers, but if this is not possible use a face mask to avoid inhaling the pollen. If you do come into contact with the plant, thoroughly wash the area in warm, soapy water.



Detailed instructions for the removal of ragwort are available at our website www.worldhorsewelfare.org

The easiest way to remove a small number of plants is by pulling the whole plant up, including the roots. It is best to do this at the seedling or rosette stage and, if possible, after rainfall when the ground is soft. Ragwort can regenerate from root fragments, so it is important to remove as much of the root as possible. A specialist fork can be purchased from retailers to help remove ragwort roots.

The easiest way of tackling a widespread infestation is to spray the paddocks, but

you must rest the field for the recommended time after treatment. Agricultural merchants can offer advice and information about available products. The dead plant is still poisonous, so you must remove all traces before putting your horses back out.

Ragwort needs to be disposed of carefully. The most effective way is to burn the weeds, taking all relevant precautions. Defra – the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – can advise on this and other methods of ragwort disposal.

Ragwort control is an ongoing process. As the seeds can remain in the ground for many years before they germinate, you are likely to find that you will have plants to remove year after year.

If ragwort seed is spreading onto your land from the surrounding area, contact Defra for advice. For ragwort enquiries in Scotland, please contact the Scottish Government.

www.defra.gov.uk
www.scotland.gov.uk

World Horse Welfare receives no government funding and relies entirely on public donations. Please help in any way you can.

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