



### Contact us

Route Isabelle Surgery  
Tel 01481 723863

Make an appointment online  
[www.isabellevets.co.uk](http://www.isabellevets.co.uk)

## Tetanus: A very real threat

It is years since a horse died of tetanus in Guernsey but there have been cases in cattle, dogs and in a human! It lies dormant in the ground, normally in manure rich areas.

Penetration of the skin / hoof by infected item (often rusty nails or barbedwire) lets the bacterium into the system where it multiplies producing toxins that 'poison' the nerve endings causing paralysis, inability to eat and breathe and eventual death. By the time a diagnosis has been made it is often too late. Mortality rates are very high and it is a painful disease.

All mammals are susceptible to tetanus, but the horse is one of the most vulnerable species.

## Spring is the time for 'Grass Sickness'

'Grass sickness' is the disease which we all dread for our horses. In certain areas of the UK it is a cause of high levels of mortality every year. The disease has been known about for over a hundred years and appears to have increased in numbers over the past thirty years. Symptoms are divided into acute, sub-acute and chronic forms with all but the latter being lethal. The animals become tucked up, sweat, have colic, the intestines stop functioning, have droopy eyelids, dry noses and problems eating and swallowing. A percentage of chronic cases will make a recovery with intensive treatment and nursing.

We still do not know the exact cause of Grass sickness but there are a number of 'risk' factors which seem to make a horse more susceptible to suffering from this dreadful condition.

Grass sickness is most prevalent in the spring, on horses with access to grass, that are less than seven years old, in good condition, with sandy soil and high nitrogen content, recent stress, dietary change, large horse numbers, lack of supplementary hay feeding and cold, dry, weather, with

overnight frosts, all contributing to the risk. Most interestingly horses with low antibody levels to the bacteria, *Clostridium botulinum* appear to be particularly at risk.

*Clostridium botulinum* is the bacteria that can cause Botulism a type of poison that causes paralysis in many species including man. It is a common bacteria that lives in the soil. A hypothesis is that some horses may be susceptible to the bacteria that may cause paralysis of certain nerves in the body producing the symptoms of Grass Sickness.

As far as I am aware we have never had a positive diagnosis of Grass Sickness in Guernsey. We have had a couple of possible cases over the years but have never been able to substantiate the tentative diagnosis.

We do know that *Clostridium botulinum* is present in the seagull population and will be in the Guernsey soil. With environmental, farming and global conditions changing there is a possibility that Guernsey may have increasing risk factors, making our horse population more open to the disease. Time will tell.

### Things to remember

- Vaccination is almost 100% protective.
- Younger horses are more vulnerable.
- Puncture wounds of hooves, limbs and surgical sites are the most common causes.
- Mortality rate is about 70%
- Treated, if no improvement in 3 days, death is likely.
- Full recovery doesn't mean a return to athletic ability. Many horses retire after infection.
- Prevention consists of a 1st course of vaccinations, a 2nd four weeks later, a 3rd 9 months later and a booster every 2 years.

## Horses can be dangerous!

Most horse owners are aware of injuries received from horses. Most are caused by accident; falling off at a jump, for example. A surprising number of injuries are caused by an unexpected reaction from a horse and many are serious.

This can be anything from a horse slipping over to being kicked when standing between two arguing animals. Some horses are more easily spooked than others.

Of course when an animal is injured or having procedures that are alien to him then the balance of risk changes. When your vet sees your horse both parties have a responsibility to care for each other. The vet must make sure the owner is suitably informed and limited from risk and the owner is

responsible for providing reasonable facilities and competent handling.

There was an article recently on risk of injury from animals (resulting in hospitalisation and/or considerable time off work) to vets in Australia which covered all work types, dogs, cattle, horses and probably kangaroos! Nearly a third of injuries were caused by horses and many included fractures and head injuries. This high percentage was a surprise to us and underlines the importance of the handler / vet relationship.



## Handling pain in horses

Pain worries us all and equally when it may be happening to our horse. There is no official grading system for pain and it may consist of behavioural, physiological, pathological and emotional components. It can also be from many sources; visceral as in colic or somatic, as from the body.

Many believe that phenylbutazone, a pain killer, is the only one available. In fact it is a 'lead-in' analgesic with limitations and there are a large array of alternative and more powerful ones. Important factors in pain treatment are accurate identification of the problem, choosing the best analgesic for the particular area (different areas of the body respond in different ways), determining level of pain and choosing an appropriate level of medication (a vet may choose a multimodal therapy).

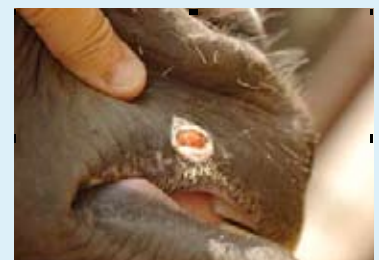
The problem with determining pain is that horses are flight animals. When there is pain their natural response is to assume that they may be preyed upon and to run. So whenever there is an owner present or even worse, the vet (!), the horse's natural response is to maximise its position and limit signs of pain as this is perceived as a weakness and will reduce the horse's flight capacity. Horses should be evaluated for pain when they're relaxed or even better when the horse is unaware of the owner's presence. Noting body posture, actions and functions is essential. This information can then be relayed to the vet to help his or her assessment.



### Cutaneous Habronemiasis: Will it come to Guernsey?

*Habronema* spp. are parasitic worms transferred by stable fly bites in tropical and temperate parts of the world. The fly lays the worm larvae in the skin where there is sweating or open wounds. They bury into the skin surface and the tissue reacts as if there is a 'foreign body', developing large granulating lumps which are often ulcerated and sore. They can occur around the eyes, face, prepuce and lower limbs in particular but any part of the body can be infected. Many animals in southern Europe, Africa and Asia suffer dreadful skin sores from this debilitating condition.

Cases of skin disease caused by *Habronema* in northern Europe have been rare with only two in Britain in the past twenty five years. The reasons are unclear but are believed to be due to several factors: Cooler climates, regular use of larvicidal worming products such as those advised in our annual worming regime, better control of flies and good horse management. However global warming and higher temperatures may lead to increasing levels of disease over the next decade.



## Watch those drouits for water hemlock this spring

Water Hemlock is a green, fleshy plant a bit like 'Alexandra' and 'Cow Parsley' which grows in abundance usually near drouits or streams. It has small white flowers and a mottled purple stem when mature with a tuber like root similar to a dahlia. The whole plant is potentially poisonous although the leaves and stem are less so. The real risk is the root (a tuber) which appears to even attract some horses.

Disease is caused by a toxin group called an alkaloid that attacks the nervous system causing wobbliness, excitement, diarrhoea, muscle spasm, abdominal pain, collapse and convulsions. Onset is rapid and even a few of inches of a tuber could kill.

When streams are cleared in late spring, exposing the roots of the water hemlock, is often the highest risk. We have had at least one fatality

in Guernsey and several other acutely ill animals. Permanent heart damage may result from even moderate poisoning.

If the symptoms are spotted and diagnosed early it is possible to restrict convulsions and the poison clears the system. Prevention is better than treatment so check your fields for and ensure that your horse cannot have access to it.