

Fact Sheet

Equine Grass Sickness (EGS)

What is EGS?

Equine Grass Sickness (equine dysautonomia) is a frequently fatal disease that affects horses, ponies and donkeys and has been recognised for more than a century.

EGS occurs almost exclusively in horses with access to grass and appears to have a seasonal occurrence, with most cases seen in the spring, although it can occur in any month of the year.

The disease mainly acts by disrupting the nerves that supply the gastrointestinal tract, hence affecting gut motility. However other parts of the general nervous system are also affected.



What are the signs of EGS?

Horses may show some of the following signs;

- Colic
- Dull demeanour
- Muscle tremors
- Sweating
- Difficulty eating/swallowing
- Excess salivation
- Eyelids appear droopy (ptosis)
- Increased heart rate (tachycardia)
- Firm faecal ball with mucus coating

How is EGS diagnosed?

It can be difficult to diagnose EGS, as the clinical features are common to other diseases.

The diagnosis is commonly presumptive and made upon clinical signs, history and exclusion of other possible diseases.

A definitive diagnosis can only be made by taking a biopsy of the small intestine. This is a surgical procedure that requires a general anaesthetic.



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What treatment options are available?

Cases of acute and subacute grass sickness are invariably fatal.

Some horses diagnosed with the chronic form will survive but they will need prolonged intensive nursing and veterinary care alongside intravenous fluids and analgesia to relieve pain.

Vigilance and prompt attention may save them, so if you suspect your horse may be showing signs of EGS, please contact the practice immediately.



How do I minimise the chance of my horse getting grass sickness?

- Limit exposure to pastures where previous cases have occurred
- Reduce the amount of soil disturbance from methods such as harrowing or mechanical faeces removal. Encourage removal of faeces by hand.
- In heavily grazed/sparse pastures offer supplementary forage (hay/haylage) in the pasture
- Avoid sudden changes in diet
- Minimise the number of horses co-grazing, especially youngsters

For further information on grass sickness including areas of current research please go to grassickness.org.uk

For further information, please contact your local VetPartners Equine Veterinary Practice on:

vetPartners

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