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*This article written by Dr. Erik Belloy DVM MRCVS, a partner at The Horse Clinic, is reprinted with the kind permission of The Essex Rider monthly magazine.*

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## AUTUMN WATCH

Ailments & Conditions that could affect your horse

*This time of year some conditions are more likely to occur in horse and ponies. By having an insight into these conditions, owners may be more in tune to pick up signs of disease early. This may help to prevent them or seek correct treatment early on. In this article, Erik Belloy will discuss autumnal health issues*

### Laminitis/Cushing's Disease/Metabolic Disease

During the autumn, horses and ponies prepare themselves for winter. While doing so, their hormones are working overtime, and many normal horses would temporarily test positive for Cushing's disease at this time of year. This is because the pituitary gland, which is the cause of Cushing's disease, is also naturally used for horses to put on some weight in preparation for the winter, as well as grow a winter coat and such like. August, September and October are not the best months to test whether horses are truly suffering from Cushing's disease, because their hormones may give false readings

Because of this natural occurrence, it is more common in autumn than in any other time of the year, for horses to develop laminitis. Furthermore, autumn grass tends to be more laden with fructans. Fructans are naturally occurring sugars in the grass. When horses have a sugar rich diet, this can lead to fermentation in the bowel, which can cause an attack of laminitis. For this reason, it is important that owners keep a close watch on the amount of turn out they give their horses and how much access to grass they allow them. When feeding horses this time of year, it is even more important than any other times of year to avoid high grain diets because they will put extra stress on the system.

Good farriery and regular checks by your farrier should alert you to early signs of things going wrong. The signs of laminitis are sudden onset lameness, usually in two or more legs, sudden difficulty to move and landing heel first when walking. Increased digital pulses (throbbing) are an early sign of laminitis and other foot conditions, but increased heat in the feet can be a very variable sign and is certainly not as reliable to detect abnormalities. Severely affected horses will often rock back when being turned. At the earliest sign of laminitis your vet should be contacted because early intervention with the correct drugs and management may prevent long term disaster.

### Colic and Impactions

On stressed paddocks, the grass can sometimes be not very plentiful. Likewise as some of the grass dries out or runs out, horses may be looking to feed from hedgerows and other sources of feed. These dietary changes could lead to signs of tummy ache. This is also the time of year when many people will start buying in more hay and feeding a different batch of hay. Studies have indicated that changing forage is one of the largest causes of colic in horses.

Furthermore, when the paddocks are wet horses are turned out less and if they are suddenly brought on to deep straw beds they may take to eating lots of this. A sudden change to coarse straws from moist grass could lead to the food impacting in one of the many bends of the horse intestinal system. Impactions can lead to blockages and pain through stretching and distending of the bowel. If your horse is prone to impactions, feeding a digestible mineral oil or some Epsom salts added to the feed can help to prevent these from occurring.

Another problem to watch out for is parasite infestations. Making sure that your horse is regularly wormed, and that the worm burden of your paddocks

is regularly monitored with worm egg counts will go a long way towards preventing colic symptoms. It is imperative to worm your horse for tapeworm in September or October. Tapeworms cannot be detected in worm egg counts and tend to collect by the inlet of the Caecum. This can lead to Caecum impaction colic, which often is easily preventable by ensuring that an appropriate wormer has been used in the autumn. Bots are another parasitic cause of gastrointestinal disease. Regular clearing of the bot eggs from the horse's coat, as well as using an appropriate wormer that kills bots should prevent disease from occurring.

### **Wounds and Injuries**

During autumn, it is quite common for horses to have a bit more competition around feed time and the odd little play fight is more likely to break out. Because of this it is not uncommon to see wounds and injuries more frequently at this time of year. As always, any wounds that involve deeper tissues (whether through deep penetration or whether through bruising or impact) should be checked out by a vet. More superficial injuries could be treated with regular irrigation and some wound gels. Do not attempt home treatment without contacting your vet if wounds are anywhere near joints or tendons on horse's leg. These should be examined by your vet as an emergency, because penetration of a joint or tendon sheath could lead to permanent lameness and severe damage to a joint.

### **Respiratory Disease**

Because horses are more often kept in at this time of year, those of them that are sensitive to dust are more likely to be affected by recurrent airway obstruction (RAO). In this condition, not unlike asthma in people, small particles are breathed in, and irritate the lungs. As a result, the horse will produce mucous and the lung might go into spasm. When this occurs, coughing at the beginning of work or when being fed are likely to be encountered.

Prevention of this problem involves care with housing the horse in a well ventilated stable, as well as bedding it on a dust free bedding and avoiding dry straw or dry hay. Soaking hay for half an hour will prevent a lot of respirable particles to enter into the horse's lungs, but feeding haylage is even better at ensuring good lung health.

### **Weight Issues**

As explained earlier, in autumn horses will naturally have a tendency to put on some weight. If your horse was already overweight going into autumn, you must

be careful to ensure it does not develop laminitis for reasons mentioned above. If your horse came to autumn and was already looking a bit poor, then keeping on their weight over winter might be a bit of a challenge. Particularly as our horse population is ageing, many horses will have less than perfect teeth and some horses may have quite a few teeth non functional or missing.

For those horses it is important that they are fed a hay replacement diet they can cope with. Soaked sugarbeet and cubes with high fibre content are a good alternative way of ensuring that these horses have adequate feed intake without overfeeding them with grains. It is vital to get your vet to check your horses teeth regularly and even more so if it is coming into autumn looking poor. Those horses that really have serious problems keeping weight on can be fed high oil diets or 100ml per 100kg of vegetable oil or corn oil added to their diet without causing any risk. Of course, as always any dietary changes should be made slowly and gradually. Horses that look poor may need to be examined by your vet for other diseases that could cause this.

### **Skin Problems**

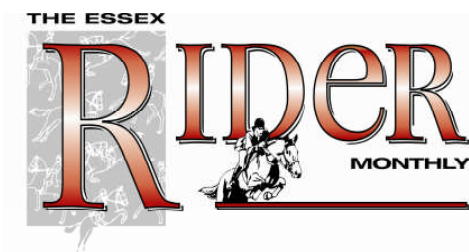
At this time of year, it is usual for increased rain fall to lead to wet paddocks, which could lead to leg infections such as mud fever. Ensuring that the horse's legs are not soaked 24 hours a day will help towards preventing chaffing and cracking of the skin which may allow some of the infections to enter. Making sure that rugs fit well and protect horses from the elements should help to prevent rug rubs causing skin infection, as well as avoiding leaking inside the rugs to allow entry of bacteria. When horses spend more time inside, or are all treated more intensively by their owners, spread of contagious diseases such as Ringworm is more likely. When small crusty lesions are seen owners are minded to wash these with antiseptic scrubs and use softening creams to treat the skin. Bear in mind, that only your vet will be able to diagnose and rule out some of the contagious skin diseases that do require more intensive management.

### **Lameness**

When the weather is turning poorer, many horses are exercised more often in a manege. Make sure you keep your horse regularly shod in the autumn and that you do not try to economise by increasing the shoeing interval. Exercising in the school more often, could lead to repetitive sprain injury. Artificial surfaces pose particular dangers if the school has inconsistent going, or is too deep. Make sure your school is regularly maintained and avoid long work periods in the manege

if your surface is not perfect. Ideally horses should ride on top of the school, rather than ride into the surface of the school.

**In conclusion, good attention to detail and a bit of knowledge and foresight are fantastic partners to prevent ailments. Hopefully, you are now armed to take timely action to prevent your horse from suffering for any of the above ailments or conditions.**



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