

Client Factsheet #4: Atypical Myopathy

What is atypical myopathy?

Atypical myopathy is a disease seen in horses that is sadly fatal in up to 80% of cases. Another name for the disease is sycamore poisoning, as it is associated with the ingestion of sycamore seeds (helicopters) and occasionally the leaves. A toxin produced by the sycamore seeds as they are digested prevents the cells of the body from being able to function properly.

What are the signs of atypical myopathy?

The signs of atypical myopathy may be similar to a horse that has “tied-up” but without the history of strenuous exercise. Clinical signs include lying down and being unable to stand, shaking and muscle tremors and dark coloured urine. Horses may choke, be more vocal than normal, or show colic signs. They may also have difficulty breathing. In very severe cases, the horse may be found dead in the field with no previous signs.

How do I know if my horse has atypical myopathy?

If you suspect your horse might have atypical myopathy, you should contact Valley Equine Hospital immediately as these are emergency cases. Prompt treatment can mean the difference between life and death. Diagnosis can be made in the laboratory by detection of very high muscle enzyme levels as well as the clinical findings.

What is the treatment for atypical myopathy?

Treatment is based around supportive care. The aim is to keep the cells of the body functioning while the toxins are flushed out. Large volumes of intravenous fluids, anti-inflammatory medication, pain relief, antioxidants and vitamins are used to help reduce the damage to the muscles and organs from the toxin.

Will my horse survive atypical myopathy?

Survival rates in the veterinary literature are reported to be very low, 10-25%. As a general rule, if the affected horse survives 5 days after initial diagnosis of the disease, it will recover. If the affected horse becomes unable to stand, the prognosis for recovery is poor.

Can I prevent my horse from getting atypical myopathy?

Preventing atypical myopathy is all about avoiding exposure to the toxin. Fields with sycamore trees nearby are at higher risk, particularly if the grazing is sparse. Autumn and spring are key risk periods. The recommendations from the British Equine Veterinary Association are:

- Supplementary feeding in the field to minimise the risk of horses being tempted to ingest seeds
- Avoid leaving wet hay on the ground where it will rot
- Fencing off affected areas
- Remove seeds where possible
- Limiting grass turnout
- Being aware that a field without sycamore trees can still contain seeds spread by high winds or flood water