

Equine Atypical Myopathy

aka Sycamore poisoning

What causes EAM?

When coming into Autumn, the leaves start turning and falling. With this the sycamore trees also start dropping their seeds. Also known as helicopter seeds or spinning jennies.

Sycamore seeds are poisonous to horses and are known to cause EAM when eaten. It can take as few as 32 seeds or as many as 9,000 seeds for EAM to be seen.



How do I prevent it?



The only way to prevent EAM is to stop horses eating the seeds. Ideally remove horses from fields which contain sycamore trees during autumn and winter. Frost does not inactivate the poisons. If this is not possible, fence the trees off leaving a margin of 3x the height of the tree. A less than ideal alternative is making sure there is plenty of food. With grass being scarce at the moment, it is more likely horses will eat the seeds when grazing short grass, so supply plenty of hay/haylage to reduce the risk. Unlike many other poisonous plants, the seeds do not taste bad so horses have no problem eating them and will not avoid them.

What is the prognosis if a horse gets EAM?

Historically between 3-15% survive with treatment. Nowadays it is closer to 40%. This is likely because owners and vets are recognising it much earlier, this is very important for the horse to survive.

What are the symptoms?

Affected horses will initially just show lethargy. This means they will be dull, quiet, often drag their feet when made to walk and hold their head low. They do not usually have a temperature, and often will have a normal appetite in the early stages. The most specific symptom is very dark brown, almost black urine. As the disease progresses, the horse struggles to stay stood up, the breathing becomes laboured and they struggle to swallow. Once the horse can no longer eat or stand, the chance of recovery reduces.



Urine sample from a horse with myopathy.

What is the treatment for EAM?

There is no antidote for this poison. However intensive care is essential for the horse to survive. Fluids, vitamins and pain killers keep the body functioning while the toxins clear. 24/7 intensive care in a referral hospital is the optimum way to support affected horses, since they cannot eat or drink and in later stages, cannot stand (requiring a sling sometimes).



What happens if an affected horse does recover?

If a horse recovers, there are no lasting effects of EAM. It can take anything from 5 to 30 days for the horse to recover, although they will often have lost a lot of weight.



Please, please walk around your field this weekend and look for this tree. Prevention is the only way to keep your horse safe from EAM!