

The Joys of Spring? Or fear & trepidation??

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Daffodils in full bloom, Catkins, the first leaves on hedges and trees, and lambs playing in the sun – spring are upon us at last!

However, while it may put a smile on the face of most of us the advent of spring strikes fear and trepidation into the hearts of hundreds of horse and pony owners up and down the country. Equine vets know that the phone will start ringing with increased numbers of chokes, colics, laminitis, and sweet itch as the temperature climbs – yet a little forward planning can prevent many of these.

Many colics and chokes occur at this time of year due to horses being turned out on lush new grass with little or no time to adapt to it. With the water table higher than it has been for years as soon as the temperature warms up grass starts to grow at an exponential rate, and its composition and water content is very different to that which has been the staple diet throughout the winter. Greedy horses may gorge themselves resulting in choke, or even more seriously: gastric impaction. Even small amounts of lush grass will ferment rapidly in the horses' large intestine causing gas colic or bowel displacements. Rapid changes in gut bacteria populations in response to the changes in grass composition will cause the release of toxins triggering laminitis. Rapid weight gain (up to several kilograms per day!) will worsen the effects of this and predispose to Insulin resistance.

How to avoid the disasters? Make changes to grazing gradually. Ideally only hand graze the lush grass for 10-15 minutes a day for the first few days before returning to winter paddocks – it's amazing how much a pony can eat in this short time! Rather than turning out in a field full of potentially deadly long grass increase the exposure to this slowly by starting with an hour and gradually building the time in the new grazing over a week or so. Paddocks could also be mown or grazed down with sheep or cattle, which is also great for parasite control – but not always practical on many premises. Grazing muzzles can also be useful, but are not always reliable.

Hopefully your horses and ponies will have reached this time of year slightly lean, having not been overfed and over rugged throughout the winter. Those carrying a lot of fat before going on the summer grazing need strict control, and especially those with previous histories of laminitis. Ensure you keep exercise levels going at this time – increased grass and decreased exercise at the same time is a very high risk factor for laminitis. Monitor your horses' movement on a hard surface daily and check for persistent heat or digital pulses. If you are unable to find them ask your vet or farrier to teach you! Obtain a weight tape and monitor your horses' weight weekly (also essential for correct wormer dosing!) and carry out fat scoring.

Many owners do not realise their horse or pony is grossly overweight and very prone to laminitis. 70% of owners in one survey underestimated their horses fat scores and 60% of the animals looked at were obese. If you are not sure visit World Horse Welfares' excellent guide at:

www.worldhorsewelfare.org/rightweight

In the UK 7-13% of horses & ponies are thought to suffer from laminitis at some point. 16,000+ suffer from chronic laminitis. 15% of acute cases are left permanently lame & around 10% need to be put down. The number of laminitis cases investigated by the WHW has risen by 1000% in 3 years. Plan ahead now and don't become part of these horrifying statistics.

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