

Read this personal experience, by Ulla Balletta, of a truly tragic disease

# Reading This Could Save Your Horse

I lost my horse to EQUINE GRASS SICKNESS in April 2011, it was the most heartbreaking experience made worse by not knowing the facts about grass sickness. Until William had it I had never heard of it, one minute I had a happy healthy horse then in less than 24 hours he was put to sleep. So many people know about colic and laminitis yet so many have not heard of grass sickness. The shock of losing William so quickly to a disease I had never heard of is what has driven me to raise funds and awareness of grass sickness. I want all horse owners to know of the simple measures you can take to try and minimise the risks of grass sickness and if it should ever happen to your horse for you to know all the information in order to not feel so helpless.

Grass sickness is a disease of horses, ponies and donkeys; it affects the nervous system causing paralysis of the entire digestive system. It can happen to any horse, anywhere at any age. It mainly happens in grazing horses aged two to seven years old



William

during spring and summer with a peak incidence in May (but there are cases all year around). It affects 1 in 100 horses in certain areas of the UK and it is estimated that 90 per cent do not survive. Great Britain has the highest incidence of grass sickness in the world, 60.9 per cent of cases occurred in England. There are three forms, acute grass sickness, sub-acute and chronic. Chronic grass sickness is the mildest form and horses with intensive nursing can recover and go on to lead a full working life.

I will never forget the day it happened, it was heartbreaking. One minute I had a happy healthy horse, and then in less than 24 hours he was gone; I was devastated. His symptoms started on the

29th April 2011. When I went to get William in from the field he was not himself, he seemed depressed and was not eating or drinking, he had difficulty passing manure and when he did it was like small pellets covered in mucous. I called the vet and he diagnosed colic, he was dehydrated, his heart rate was 80 (average heart rate is 38-42bpm) and the vet drained 12 litres of reflux (green stomach fluid). He was rushed to Newmarket hospital that evening by which time his heart rate had gone up to 100. It was then that grass sickness was mentioned to me, I had never heard of it so when I got home that night I was on



ACUTE	SUB ACUTE	CHRONIC
Depression	Tucked up abdomen	Severe weight loss
Absence of gut sounds	Weight loss	Markedly tucked up
High heart rate	Difficulty swallowing	Base narrow stance
Gastric reflux	Colic	Rhinitis sicca
Difficulty eating & drinking	Tachycardia	Ptosis
Failure to pass droppings	Gastric reflux	Slightly elevated heart rate
Patchy sweating	Patchy sweating	Muscle tremors
Muscle tremors	Muscle tremors	Patchy sweating
Ptosis ( <i>drooping eyelids</i> )	Colon impaction	Mild colic
Salivation	Reduced gut motility	Reduced gut motility
Colic ( <i>occasionally</i> )	Rhinitis sicca	

the internet frantically trying to find out as much as possible; the more I read the more scared I was, it was not looking good. I felt completely helpless, everything was taken out of my control, I knew nothing about grass sickness, did not know the symptoms or that there were 3 forms of it. William was very sadly put to sleep the next day, they had gone in to operate for colic but it was confirmed it was grass sickness and nothing could be done. It was devastating and all I could think all day was why I did not stay in the hospital with him that night. Did I give him a big enough hug and hoped he knew how much I loved him. It was a devastating experience made worse by not knowing the facts about grass sickness. Horse owners need to be vigilant at peak times looking out for any changes in

eating/drinking habits, or behaviour that is out of the ordinary. Below is information on how to recognize the symptoms and the simple measures you can take to try and minimise the risks of grass sickness.

It would be great if one day we could all have our horses vaccinated against grass sickness the way we do against tetanus and flu. We are getting closer to that day as a Vaccine Trial Pilot Study has been announced

## Risk Factors

- Grazing pastures where cases have occurred in last 2 years.
- Pasture/soil disturbance (*digging fence posts, harrowing as this puts more soil on top therefore increasing clostridium botulinum spore availability*)
- Mechanical poo picking
- Sudden changes in diet (*Can be a trigger*)
- High stress situations (*Travel, moving to a new yard, new field mates*)
- Sudden weather changes at peak season (*Spring/early summer*)
- Areas where fowl are present.
- Young horses aged 2 - 7 yrs (*but can happen at any age & those new to the yard*)
- The recent use of ivermectin based wormer. (*Affects the gut micro flora at a high risk time, the use of probiotics may be beneficial following worming*)
- High soil nitrogen

## Potential Protective Factors

- Co-graze with ruminants
- Minimise soil disturbance
- Avoid sudden changes in diet
- Hand removal of droppings
- Minimise stress (*effects microflora and acidity of the gut*)
- Feed hay daily (*It stabilizes gut bacteria, as the nutritional content of grass fluctuates wildly according to weather*)
- Try to avoid 24 hour turn out during Spring & early summer (*Part stable during these times*)
- Minimise soil exposure eg close grazing/poaching of fields

*The main line of investigation is the role of soil-borne bacteria clostridium botulinum type C as the cause of grass sickness.*