

Plant poisonings are something to keep an eye out for especially as we enter the summer months with more cattle are out grazing. This is in addition to the other types of poisoning that we can see which includes metals and minerals. Quite often, if large amounts of these plants are ingested, it can be fatal and mortality is high. Treatment is generally symptomatic and supportive, involving reducing absorption of the toxin and removing the source. In some cases, there is a specific treatment available, so if you suspect any cases of poisoning, it is always best to contact your vet.

There are many different plants that can cause toxicity, but below are some of the key examples.

Common Plant Poisonings:

Acorns

- As many of you will have seen, there were plenty of acorns around last autumn. Acorns contain phenols and tannins, which can be toxic when ingested by cattle. Clinical signs include colic, inappetence, weight loss, black, tarry constipation, followed by black, tarry diarrhoea and blood in the urine due to kidney damage and gastrointestinal (GI) ulceration. Diagnosis is based on history, clinical signs, and blood tests assessing kidney function. If a toxic dose has been ingested, mortality rates are high. Clinical signs are often seen from around two days after ingestion.



Yew

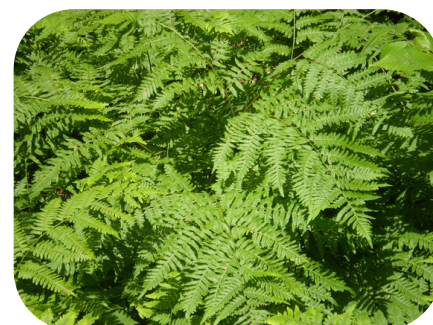
- Yew toxicity often causes sudden death in cattle. Diagnosis is usually based on the history and a post-mortem examination, where yew material may be identified within the rumen. If you are aware of any yew plants or hedges near grazing cattle, move them to a different pasture or remove access to the plants.



Bracken

- Bracken poisoning occurs in two different forms and is most commonly seen when grazing is scarce. One form is acute haemorrhagic syndrome, which occurs when large amounts of bracken are ingested over several weeks. Clinical signs include a high temperature, loss of appetite, pale gums, and bloody diarrhoea. The prognosis is very poor, with death often occurring within a week.

The more chronic form is **enzootic haematuria**, which develops after small amounts are ingested over several months to years. This causes tumours to develop in the bladder, leading to blood in the urine. There is no specific treatment other than supportive care and mortality is high. If grazing where bracken is present, ensure cattle have plenty of alternative forage available, particularly during dry, late summer conditions.



Hemlock

- Hemlock looks similar to cow parsley, but one of the main differences is that its stems have distinctive purple spots and the plant has an unpleasant smell. All parts of the plant contain toxic alkaloids and even small amounts can be fatal. Clinical signs include neurological symptoms such as trembling, muscle weakness and paralysis. Death often occurs within hours due to respiratory failure. Once established, hemlock can spread rapidly and remains toxic when baled into hay, so check fence lines, field margins and watercourses regularly for new growth.



Ragwort

- Ragwort poisoning is often associated with horses, but it also affects cattle. Although the fresh plant is generally unpalatable, it becomes more readily eaten once cut and can contaminate hay or silage. Ragwort causes irreversible liver damage, resulting in chronic weight loss, depression, and eventual liver failure.



Marestail

- Marestail is commonly found near rivers and wet ground. Although generally unpalatable, it can become incorporated into hay or silage if cut. Clinical signs are mainly neurological and may include apparent blindness and convulsions. Treatment with vitamin B1 (thiamine) may be effective, but for the best prognosis it should be started as soon as possible.



Regular inspection of grazing areas and removal of toxic plants where possible can significantly reduce the risk of poisoning. If you suspect plant toxicity, contact us, as early intervention offers the best chance of a successful outcome.



Lucy



FARM MEDICINE HANDLING COURSE - FOR BEEF AND SHEEP CLIENTS

Thursday 16th July, 10.30am - 12:00pm

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