

Liver Disease in the Horse

Liver disease in horses is probably more common than we realise, because the liver can compensate well if damage is present. Liver failure occurs when more than two thirds of liver function is compromised.



Common signs of liver failure are weight loss, a yellow colour to the gums and abnormal behaviour. The abnormal behaviour is due to waste products, which cannot be removed by the liver anymore, building up in the body and seeping into the brain, which then stops the brain from functioning correctly. The appetite of the horse may be affected resulting in anorexia and there may be signs of colic. Signs of skin disease may be present, such as itching and loss of pigment in the skin.

The diagnosis of liver disease is based on a full clinical examination of the horse combined with a variety of tests as thought appropriate by your veterinary surgeon. As there are many different causes of liver disease treatment regimes vary for individuals. Treatments will mainly consist of dietary manipulation and may include fluid therapy with or without antibiotics depending on clinical findings. The outcome for liver failure is sadly grave.

In overweight horses, but more commonly in ponies and donkeys, which have a reduced intake of feed for any reason, may develop a condition called "Hyperlipidaemia". In hyperlipidaemia the fat in the body redistributes itself to the liver causing a "fatty liver" to develop. This results in liver failure because the liver is no longer able to function properly. This is a very serious condition, which even with intensive treatment, often leads to a poor outcome.

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