

Hey Neighbor

For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

Deadly Blister Beetles Remain A Threat

Blister beetles in alfalfa remain lethal to horses today.

If a horse is colicing, breathing rapidly, trembling, stiff, sweating profusely, urinating frequently, has diarrhea, keeps his muzzle in the water, or has some of these conditions, they could be symptoms of blister beetle poisoning. A veterinarian needs to treat the horse immediately. Time is of the essence.

Horse deaths from feeding alfalfa containing blister beetles made headlines over two decades ago. The threat continues today.

"Blister beetle toxicity can certainly be a problem for horse owners who feed alfalfa, and they should be alert to that possibility," warned Dr. Beth Davis, equine veterinarian at Kansas State University.

One of the first and most

publicized blister beetle poisonings in this area was over 25 years ago when Billie Evans of St. George lost a horse to the toxicity.

"It was an ugly deal," Evans recalled. "We took our horse right in for treatment, and she was dead within 24 hours. I've never fed alfalfa since, and I warn everybody not to feed alfalfa. It's not worth the risk."

Veterinarians won't go that far in their advice. "Alfalfa is good feed for horses, but there needs to be awareness of blister beetles," Davis advised.

"Horse owners have been warned, and those around here pay attention to the alfalfa they feed," said Dr. Robert Haynes, Junction City veterinarian, who still gets calls to treat horses for blister beetle toxicity.

"We do have fewer cases,

because people are well educated. But we see a handful or more suspects each year," explained Davis.

Treatment for horses suspected of having blister beetle poisoning, which causes mucous membrane irritation, heart problems and low blood-calcium, is started immediately, even if a definite prognosis has not been made, Davis emphasized.

"Every second counts," she added.

In addition to the previously mentioned symptoms, Davis checks for blister beetles in the alfalfa and the feed trough to aid in diagnosis. Urine samples are sent away for confirmation.

The first line of treatment is an attempt to rid the horse of the beetles through



application of activated charcoal. Then, Davis said, the horse is given general colic support with medication for pain and high-volume intravenous fluids. Mineral oil is used to soothe digestive system irritation.

Deadliness of blister beetles depends on the species and the number consumed. "Blister beetles contain the poison cantharidin in varying concentrations. The minimum dose to cause death can be quite small," Davis explained.

When there is response to treatment, the blister beetle poisoning is not too severe, and recovery is possible with follow-up medica-

tions, Haynes said.

Even then, side effects such as founder are a result of the stress, and system trauma could occur.

Blister beetles are a swarming insect and can be seen over entire fields of alfalfa. "They become a problem when the hay is crimped, and the beetles end up in the hay. Sometimes, only one bale will have beetles," Haynes commented.

"First and last cuttings of alfalfa are usually the safest," Davis said. "When alfalfa is mowed and raked, there is usually no problem."

Second-cutting alfalfa is considered the most dangerous for blister beetle poisoning.

Beetle larvae feed on grasshopper eggs, and an increase in grasshopper populations one year, Davis calculated, could mean additional blister beetles the following year.

Dr. Sam Graham, state veterinarian, said there are higher populations of blis-

ter beetles in southern Kansas and even more in Oklahoma and Texas.

"Problems can arise when alfalfa is shipped in," Graham noted.

Ways to avoid blister beetle problems:

Buy alfalfa from a supplier who is aware of blister beetles and takes precautions to prevent problems.

Use only first and last cutting alfalfa.

Harvest alfalfa before it blooms, because blister beetles are attracted to the plant at that stage.

Only feed alfalfa that is mowed, raked and baled into small square bales.

Check bales flake by flake for blister beetles as well as for grasshoppers and blooms, which can be warning signs.

Feed grass hay.

Horror stories of million-dollar horses dying from blister beetle poisoning haven't been in the news lately, but the beetles are still around. They are like a time bomb hidden in a bale of alfalfa.

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