

## ACORN POISONING: A PARTICULARLY PREVALENT PROBLEM THIS AUTUMN

The warm, dry summer experienced this year means that oak trees all over the UK have produced a bumper crop of acorns. Combining this with the widespread lack of forage also experienced due to the summer conditions has equated to a recipe for disaster in grazing areas where oak trees are present – as animals search for any alternative food sources they can find.

### Who is affected, and why?

Acorn poisoning most commonly affects cattle, sheep and horses, but can also affect goats, alpacas and deer. Interestingly, pigs appear to be resistant to any adverse affects! The acorns, buds and leaves of oak trees all contain tannins and phenols; chemicals which when metabolised become highly toxic to the kidneys, gut and liver. Immature green acorns contain much higher levels of these chemicals than mature acorns, however mature acorns can still cause problems if ingested in high enough quantities.

### What symptoms should I look for?

The onset of symptoms can vary and ranges from sudden death within 24 hours of ingestion, to delayed presentation 2-10 days later – however by this stage the damage can often be done. Most commonly symptoms begin with depression, reduced appetite, abdominal pain and reduced gut turnover (which can sometimes result in bloat); along with constipation and hard faeces which can be black or bloody. As the damage progresses, the constipation often advances to bloody diarrhoea. Other symptoms sometimes seen include yellow discolouration of the eyes and gums due to liver damage, and bloody urine due to kidney damage – however when these symptoms occur the prognosis is often grave.

### What treatment is available?

There is no specific treatment for acorn poisoning, meaning that supportive treatment is our best option – however the success of this depends on the severity of symptoms and quantity of toxin consumed. Anyone suspecting acorn poisoning should move the affected group of animals away from the source, give them plenty of water and get in touch immediately. Supportive treatment we can provide typically includes pain relief, anti-inflammatories, fluid therapy, activated charcoal to bind any remaining toxins in the gut, liver support, and an antibiotic to cover for secondary infections.

### What else can I do?

With limited treatment options, emphasis should be placed on prevention. Fencing off, or avoiding grazing areas where oak trees are present is the best way to prevent exposure. Particular vigilance after autumn storms is beneficial as large quantities of ripe acorns are likely to drop.

If it is not possible to completely avoid grazing near oak trees, extra care should be taken to ensure there is sufficient forage present, and if needed, extra food should be supplemented to lower the likelihood of animals searching for alternative food sources – however it is important to note that this will not fully prevent animals from ingesting acorns as much as fencing off or avoiding areas would.

A wider discussion about the poisonous plant and tree species present on your farm is also something to consider as part of your pasture management, and may help you better understand where issues might occur and how to mitigate risk throughout the year.



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