

## Yellow signals DANGER!



The pretty but toxic ragwort flower can cause major health problems.

Redwings all too often receives reports of people dismissing the serious issue of ragwort. Those who choose to ignore it are not only putting their own animals at risk, but other people's too.

Ragwort contains toxins that permanently damage a horse's liver. Its effects are not instant but show up over time - anything from a few weeks to a few years. Symptoms only occur once the liver has been damaged. These include weight loss, diarrhoea, depression and bizarre behaviour.

A particularly nasty effect of ragwort poisoning and liver damage is photosensitization (see photo above). The liver cannot filter out harmful substances in plants, which then accumulate in pink patches of skin and then react with sunlight, causing painful sores and blisters.

A flowering ragwort plant can produce up to 150,000 seeds with a 70% germination rate. The seeds are rapidly spread by the wind rapidly, so even if a land owner feels it will not affect their own animals, their negligence could leave someone else with a huge

problem. It could spread onto hay fields and end up undetected in bales of hay. Once dry, it loses its bitter taste, making it more palatable to equines.

In its living state, horses are likely to spit ragwort out because of its bitterness. **However**, discarded bits of plant will dry, meaning horses are much more likely to eat them as they continue to graze the land.

We need to **prevent** the spread of this plant by spreading a message of its danger to **all** land owners. Many responsible horse owners do their best to battle the plant, but struggle year on year due to others' ignorance of the plant's ability to spread.

If you know somebody who is letting ragwort get out of control, try approaching them to let them know the scale of the problem. If you find your efforts are fruitless, you can go to DEFRA's website to file a complaint. They are responsible for enforcing the Ragwort Act 2003, and the Weeds Act 1959. Contact the Highways Agency if you see ragwort growing along the roadside, and Network Rail for plants growing along railway lines.

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**WHAT  
CLIMATE  
CHANGE  
COULD MEAN  
FOR YOUR  
HORSE**

**PLUS** a special feature on RAO (*recurrent airway obstruction*) also known as COPD.



Incorporating Ada Cole  
Memorial Stables

Please contact us at:

**The Welfare Team**  
Redwings Horse Sanctuary  
Hapton, Norwich, NR15 1SP, ring us  
on 01508 481008 or email  
externalwelfare@redwings.co.uk.

# a changing climate

Britain's climate is changing. We are experiencing extremes of weather more often, such as droughts, freezing temperatures and heat waves.

What does this mean for the way we keep horses? We have already seen the effect the climate has had on hay yields over the past few years, thanks to late Springs and dry Summers. But changing weather patterns may also contribute to an increased risk of some health issues, as well as an effect on the quality of grazing.

## Insects

Insects that cause irritation such as midges are growing in population because of a warmer climate. This is bad news for **Sweet Itch sufferers**. Owners need to make preparations to prevent the effects of the condition earlier in the year – such as applying a suitable insect repellent (on the advice of a vet) or kitting your horse out with a Sweet Itch blanket.



Insects can irritate the eye area too, leading to **conjunctivitis** where the lining of the eyelid becomes inflamed. The horse's eye may look a little red around the outside and will be weepy. The eye may appear half-closed too. The horse may try to rub his eye to relieve discomfort (risking further damage!) and may shake his head around a lot.

Conjunctivitis is normally easy to treat. Call your vet who will prescribe treatment like eye drops or antibiotics. It's really important to work out what caused the inflammation in the first place to prevent it happening again. **Flies** and **dust** are common culprits, so equipping your horse with a mesh visor will help.

## Pasture Management

Increased Winter rainfall means land is at higher risk of 'poaching' (where land is churned up). Horses are naturally very good at churning up land anyway, thanks to the shape of their hooves!



When poached land dries out in the Summer months, **ruts** are formed making **lameness** increasingly likely for horses (especially older unshod horses), and making it extremely uncomfortable for those already suffering with **arthritis**.

Grass struggles to grow on poached land, leaving bare patches in paddocks. It also creates the perfect conditions for **ragwort growth**. Rotating between paddocks in the Summer and Winter, cleaning up droppings regularly, and keeping land well-drained, helps to maintain good grazing and prevent the growth of the weed. Dig up the plant in its first year of growth while it is still in rosette form, before it gets a chance to flower. Flowering ragwort has more resilient roots.

Let Winter grazing rest for at least 4 or 5 months over the Spring and Summer, and make sure you have more grazing available over the Winter than the Summer to reduce the burden on the land. Make sure Winter grazing has good drainage and that you have a dry area around gateways where horses tend to congregate. This could be a concrete pad, woodchip, or ground reinforcement tiles such as 'perfo'. In the short-term, move horses off particularly wet pasture into a barn or

stabling. Looking after your grazing will help to reduce your reliance on hay too – which has become expensive and harder to obtain over the last few years due to a national shortage.

## Hairy Monsters!

Many of our residents - our Shetlands especially - are holding on to their Winter coats for as long as possible into the Summer (despite some weeks of blazing hot weather). We have had to clip some of them out to stop them from overheating!

Extremes of temperature make life even more difficult for our four-legged friends with Equine Cushings Syndrome. Horses with the syndrome have a tumour on their pituitary gland which increases the production of cortisol (a hormone that controls many things, including temperature regulation). Cushings sufferers often get too hot or too cold and have an increased risk of laminitis. Extremes of temperature make it even more important to ensure Cushings sufferers are on medication prescribed by a vet to manage the condition.



## Exotic Diseases

A warm climate is more hospitable to certain insects that carry 'exotic diseases' such as African Horse Sickness.

The risk of African Horse Sickness entering the UK is relatively low, but concern grew when sheep and cattle were infected with the Bluetongue virus several years ago. The virus is spread by the same species of midge as

AHS, showing that the midge does have the ability to survive in our climate. However, it is thought that the midge was introduced to the UK via a box of imported plants and not blown in by the wind.

AHS is a virus. It is not transmitted through direct contact with an infected horse. A midge will bite an infected horse, then go on to bite a healthy one and infect it with the virus. There is a high mortality rate amongst horses with the disease (around 90%). Although it's not likely that AHS will enter the UK any time soon, owners should make themselves aware of the symptoms which include fever, swellings on the head and heavy nasal discharge. DEFRA should be notified straight away if a horse is diagnosed with the virus.

## Hard Ground

Parts of Britain, especially East Anglia, officially faced drought conditions this year – and are set to face more in the future. Dry spells make the ground especially dusty, which contributes to conditions like conjunctivitis, and will exacerbate breathing conditions like **RAO (recurrent airway obstruction)**. *Read more on the next page about this condition.*

Dusty pasture could also increase instances of sand colic. Avoid it by not feeding hay from the ground, and try to prevent poaching of land in the Winter. If you are worried your horse has been ingesting sand, put a small amount of droppings in a jar with water. Any sand in the droppings will sink to the bottom. Remove your horse from sandy pasture if this is the case.

Dry spells means the ground is hard for a significant amount of time. Hoof care has always been an essential part of equine management, but increasing periods of dry weather and hard ground make it all the more important. Hard ground may leave a horse foot sore; the horse's sole can get bruised, causing lameness, especially during hard work. Horses with poor hoof conformation, with thin or flat soles are more susceptible, or those that are poorly shod. Hoof cracks are also more likely when ground is hard, as they are often caused by trauma to the foot. Also beware of concussive laminitis, where the laminae in the hoof wall are subjected to trauma due to hard ground. Be vigilant as to the conditions of the ground before you work your horse.

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### Keep in touch

If you would like to receive editions of **Welfare Matters** in future please complete the details (right), detach the form and send it to The Welfare Team, Redwings, Hapton, Norwich, NR15 1SP, ring us on 01508 481008 or email [externalwelfare@redwings.co.uk](mailto:externalwelfare@redwings.co.uk).

If you do not wish to be added to Redwings' general mailing list please tick here  Redwings **DOES NOT** share your details with any third party organisations.

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# RAO

## a condition not to be sneezed at!

### What is it?

RAO stands for recurrent airway obstruction. It is also known as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder) or heaves. Sufferers have an allergic reaction to dust or pollen, similar to humans with asthma or hayfever, where the diameter of airway tubes narrows. The body produces mucus to help soothe the inflammation, but this can block up the airways even more.

Its severity varies between sufferers and is more likely to occur in middle aged or older horses. As asthma sufferers will know, severe RAO attacks can be very distressing for both horse and carer.

### What causes it?

RAO is a very common condition in Britain because of the environment horses are often kept in. Stabled horses that are exposed to unsoaked poor quality hay and straw, which are naturally very dusty, are more susceptible. Those that are kept on deep littered beds are also at risk, as mould spores will trigger an allergic reaction. It is much better for an RAO sufferer to be turned out most of the time, and only put into a scrupulously clean stable!

However, horses that permanently live outdoors are not excluded from risk! Pollen is a contributing factor to a seasonal form of RAO, which affects some horses in the Summer months, known as Summer pasture-associated recurrent airway obstruction. As mentioned in the previous pages, drought-conditions are leaving some paddocks very dusty, which may trigger a reaction too.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of both typical RAO and summer pasture-associated RAO include one or more of the following:

- Laboured breathing
- Wheezing
- Coughing
- Lack of energy
- Runny nose
- Flared nostrils
- Heaving belly
- Increased respiratory rate (a normal respiratory rate is 8 – 14 breaths a minute)

Symptoms usually occur very quickly once a horse is exposed to an allergen. A cough and/or a runny nose are also symptoms of Strangles, so if you find your horse has either of these without exposure to a potential allergen, remove your horse from contact with others until Strangles has been ruled out by a vet.

### What can I do about it?

If you spot any symptoms of RAO, call your vet for expert advice and treatment. The vet will examine your horse and determine the severity of the condition.

RAO is a palliative condition, which means it cannot be cured but it can be relieved. The best course of action is to pinpoint what is causing the allergic reaction and either remove it from the horse's environment, or remove the horse from that environment! Limit a horse's exposure to the allergen as far as possible.

If a dusty stable is causing a reaction, then consider turning a horse out 24 hours a day... as far away from any muck heaps or haystacks as possible! If this cannot be done, make sure stables are well ventilated, always clean, and lined with shavings or cardboard-based bedding. Never muck out with your horse in the stable. Hay must be soaked – or try using haylage. Some horses may have such a severe allergy that even haylage irritates them, so you may need to feed an alternative such as high fibre cubes.

If pollen is the cause, try a mesh net over the horse's nose to limit exposure. However, if the allergy is too severe for this to have an effect, consider moving a horse to a different area if you can with less wooded areas or foliage.

Unmanaged RAO can lead to permanent changes in the lungs making them more prone to secondary infection.

A vet may prescribe Ventipulmin, which can be given orally on a regular basis, or straight into the vein during an attack. It provides relief by opening the airways. Horsey inhalers are also a wonderful form of treatment!

**For more information, get in touch with your vet, or call Redwings on 01508 481008.**



*Oliver was severely neglected before his arrival at Redwings nearly three years ago. He is an RAO sufferer and needed an intensive course of treatment. He still needs his horsey inhaler from time to time!*



*Make sure stabling is well ventilated or try 24 hour turn-out.*