



What's Creeping Through Your Pasture?

By: Ellen Weaver, DVM

Creeping indigo has caught the attention of horse owners throughout Florida due to the plant's stealthy ability to invade pastures and the serious disease it causes when ingested over a period of time. Although horses tend to avoid most toxic plants, creeping indigo offers a palatability, which horses will indulge in rather than avoid. Due to the willingness to ingest the plant and the lack of treatment available at this time, it is important for horse owners to identify the plant, know the signs of creeping indigo toxicity and the ways to prevent this plant from being ingested.

At first glance, creeping indigo is difficult to find throughout pasture settings. Described in the Compendium of Invasive Plants as a prostrate, perennial herb, creeping indigo lies flat against the ground with stems that branch out from the central root. The stems are a pale green to yellow color with paired, clover like leaves that are 1-5 cm long. Flowers are slender and tubular in shape and can range in color from brick red to pink. One of the main characteristics of this plant is the needle-like, sharp-tipped seedpods that are 1-3 cm long and point downwards. The plant typically lives for two or more years and although it dies off in the winter, will grow back from its root in the spring.

According to Dr. Rob MacKay, an internist at the University of Florida, consumption of 10 pounds of creeping indigo daily for a period of 3 weeks is sufficient to cause disease. Depending on the amount ingested, signs can range from non-specific to the more serious neurologic form. Owners should monitor their horses for clinical signs such as weight loss, inappetance, labored breathing, hypersalivation, feed retention in cheeks, foul breath, watery discharge from the eyes, opacities or ulcerations on the eye and ulceration of the tongue and gums. A more severe form of toxicity presents neurologic signs in which you would see a change in personality such as horses becoming quieter and less active, a lower head carriage, compulsive walking in the stall or paddock with heads tilted to one side, muzzle and lips hanging flaccidly and incoordination. Horses with incoordination may cross limbs while standing, have an abnormal posture at rest, trip or stumble while walking and buckle and fall while standing.

Currently there is no specific treatment for creeping indigo toxicity. If any of the above signs are found and creeping indigo is identified in the area, horses should be immediately removed from the source. Once access to creeping indigo is removed, horses with mild signs may be able to completely recover, although some may still have persistent gait abnormalities. Horses presenting with the neurologic form of toxicity may need long-term supportive care. If you suspect your horse may have creeping indigo toxicity, you should contact your veterinarian right away. Although there is no specific treatment, many horses will respond favorably to supportive care dictated by your veterinarian especially if the process is caught in the early stages.

Since treatment options are limited, prevention is key in order to avoid creeping indigo toxicity. The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences recommends two herbicides, both of which contain aminopyralid: Milestone (Dow Agrochemicals) or GrazonNext HL (Dow Agrochemicals.) The products containing aminopyralid were designed purposefully for grazing lands and should not harm normal pasture grasses. The plants need to be sprayed with the herbicide and once dead, should be removed from the property, as the plant will still retain the toxicity. Plant removal should include complete removal of the root, which can be up to three feet long, in order to prevent regrowth the following year.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

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Sources Listed:

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