

IDENTIFYING TOXIC PLANTS



WHAT IS A 'WEED'?

A **weed** is any plant that grows where it is **not wanted**. It can grow in gardens, pastures, crops, or roadsides and often competes with desirable plants for **nutrients, water, and sunlight**. Weeds can spread quickly and sometimes produce **toxins** that are harmful to animals or people. Essentially, a weed is defined more by its **location and impact** than by the type of plant itself.

WHAT IS A 'WEED POISONING'?

Weed poisoning occurs when an animal, such as a horse, **eats a toxic plant** that causes harm to its body. Some weeds contain **chemical compounds or toxins** that can damage organs like the **liver, kidneys or nervous system**, interfere with blood function, or cause skin reactions. Symptoms depend on the plant type and the amount eaten, but may include **lethargy, weight loss, jaundice, digestive upset, photosensitivity or neurological signs**. In many cases, chronic or repeated ingestion of toxic weeds is more dangerous than a single small exposure.

Many poisonous plants in Australia are unpalatable and are usually only eaten by horses when other forage is unavailable or out of boredom.

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CLINICAL SIGNS

Toxin poisoning can be **acute** or **chronic**, depending on whether a horse eats a large amount of a highly toxic plant at once, or consumes small amounts of toxic weeds repeatedly over time.

- **Acute** poisoning can happen when a horse eats **large quantities** of toxic plants in contaminated hay or feed, or when environmental conditions causes these toxin filled plants to dominate the pasture. Acute signs are usually dramatic, easier to notice, and require immediate veterinary attention.
- **Chronic** poisoning occurs when the horse ingests **small amounts** of the plants over time. Chronic signs develop slowly and are often overlooked until the liver or other organs are significantly damaged. Early detection (monitoring weight, coat, behaviour, and mild photosensitivity) is critical.

Here is a range of clinical signs you may see if you suspect your horse has ingested any poisonous plants



Photosensitisation (red, painful, peeling skin on white areas)

Jaundice (yellow discolouration of the body tissue)



Weight Loss

Lethargy

Head Shaking

Rapid/Laboured breathing



Head Pressing

Poor Coat

Diarrhoea

Stringhalt

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RAGWORT - JACOBaea VULGARIS

Description: Ragwort, a highly toxic plant for horses, that is characterised by its yellow flowers and deeply lobed leaves. Ragwort contains **pyrrolizidine alkaloids** which causes severe, **irreversible liver damage** with effects accumulating over time. Even small amounts consumed regularly are harmful.

Symptoms: Weight loss, lethargy, poor coat, jaundice, photosensitivity, neurological signs (head pressing, aimless walking), sudden death

Common Location: Pastures, roadsides, disturbed soils (VIC, NSW, TAS, SA)



Toxicity Level : High

PATTERSONS CURSE - ECHIUM PLANTAGINEUM



Toxicity Level : Moderate

Description: Patterson's curse is an invasive weed with purple-blue flowers and hairy leaves. It contains **pyrrolizidine alkaloids** which causes cell death to organs like the **liver**. It is toxic to livestock and can quickly dominate pastures, requiring effective management strategies for control.

Symptoms: Liver damage, photosensitivity, jaundice, weight loss, lethargy, digestive disturbances, respiratory issues and in severe cases, death.

Common Location: Pastures, roadsides, degraded land (NSW, VIC, SA)

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CAPE WEED - ARCTOTHECA CALENDULA

Description: Cape Weed has bright yellow daisy-like flowers and lobed leaves. Cape Weed is a flat weed which can quickly spread and outcompete native vegetation, impacting pasture growth. The main risk is **nitrate poisoning** and **liver stress** leading to **photosensitisation**

Symptoms: Rapid or laboured breathing, Photosensitisation, can induce a magnesium deficiency in horses, potentially resulting in heightened nervousness, gastrointestinal irritation/diarrhoea and colic

Common Location: Southern Australia: VIC, NSW (south), SA, TAS, SW WA; pastures, roadsides, overgrazed paddocks



Toxicity Level : Low-moderate

DOCK - RUMEX CRISPUS/OBTUSIFOLIUS



Toxicity Level : Low - Moderate

Description: Curled/Broadleaf Dock is a common pasture weed with broad green leaves and a tall flowering stem. It contains **oxalates** and **nitrates**, which can cause digestive upset and bind calcium reducing its availability if eaten in large amounts. It can become a risk when pasture quality is poor or the plant is present in hay.

Symptoms: Reduced appetite, lethargy, weakness, muscle soreness/reduced performance, diarrhoea (occasionally)

Common Location: Pastures, damp or fertile soils, waterways, overgrazed paddocks (widespread across Australia)

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BRACKEN FERN - *PTERIDIUM ESCULENTUM*

Description: Bracken fern is a perennial weed with large, triangular fronds that often form dense patches. It contains **thiaminase** and other toxins which can cause **liver damage** and **neurological problems** in horses. It is toxic to livestock and can spread rapidly in pastures, making careful management and control essential.

Symptoms: Weight loss, dullness, incoordination, staggering, neurological signs, sudden death

Common Location: Wooded areas, gully pastures, shaded paddocks and fencelines



Toxicity Level : High

STICKY BARTSIA - *PARENTUCELLIA VIScosa*



Toxicity Level : Moderate

Description: Sticky Bartsia is a low-growing, invasive weed with sticky leaves and small yellow-green flowers that often form dense mats in pastures. It contains compounds that can cause **liver stress** and may lead to **photosensitivity** in horses and other livestock.

Symptoms: Weight loss, poor condition, dullness, reduced appetite, intermittent diarrhoea, photosensitivity

Common Location: VIC, TAS, SA, SW WA - damp pastures, roadsides

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ST. JOHN'S WORT - HYPERICUM PERFORATUM

Description: St. John's Wort is a perennial weed with bright yellow flowers and small, perforated leaves. It contains **hypericin**, a compound that can cause **severe photosensitivity** in horses, especially on **pale or unpigmented skin**.

Symptoms: Photosensitivity (especially on light skin), depression, lethargy, reduced appetite

Common Location: VIC, TAS, SA, NSW – pastures, roadsides



Toxicity Level : High

PASPALUM - PASPALUM DILATATUM



Toxicity Level : High

Description: Paspalum is a grass commonly found in pastures and irrigated paddocks. When the **seed heads become infected with a fungus (mould)**, they produce **mycotoxins** that can harm horses, causing neurological signs (staggers). While the grass itself is usually safe, **mouldy seed heads pose a significant risk**.

Symptoms: Neurological signs, tremors/staggers, poor coordination, nervousness, overreaction to stimuli, lethargy, reduced appetite, collapse

Common Location: VIC, NSW, TAS – pastures, irrigated paddocks

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PREVENTION & MANAGEMENT

- **Inspect pastures regularly** – look for the common toxic weeds and learn to identify them before they start to flower or seed
- **Remove or control weeds** – manually remove, mow or use horse-safe herbicides to manage toxic plants before they spread.
- **Maintain healthy pastures** – rotate grazing, avoid overgrazing, and sow desirable pasture species to reduce weed invasion.
- **Check hay** – ensure stored feed is free of weeds such as ragwort, Paterson's curse, or Cape Weed as they are often more palatable when dead in hay.
- **Fence off high-risk areas** – restrict access to roadsides, riparian zones, or paddocks with heavy weed infestations.
- **Provide adequate feed and supplements** – most toxic weeds aren't palatable and horses are less likely to consume them if they have sufficient quality pasture or hay.
- **Educate everyone involved** – teach friends and horse owners how to identify toxic weeds and recognise early signs of poisoning.
- **Act quickly if ingestion is suspected** – remove the horse from contaminated areas and seek veterinary advice immediately.



It's crucial for horse owners to be vigilant about the presence of toxic weeds in pastures. Creating an environment that supports the overall well-being of your horses is key to ensuring they remain healthy and happy.

**If you have any questions or concerns please contact us on
0412 619 740.**