

Sycamore Poisoning in Horses

Atypical Myopathy (Sycamore Poisoning) in Horses

Atypical myopathy, also known as sycamore poisoning or seasonal pasture myopathy (SPM), is a serious and potentially fatal muscle disease in horses caused by ingesting parts of the sycamore tree. This condition affects your horse's muscles, which can lead to serious complications in vital organs like the heart and lungs.



What Causes Atypical Myopathy?

The culprit behind atypical myopathy is a toxin called Hypoglycin A (HGA), which is found in the sycamore tree (specifically, the maple or *Acer pseudoplatanus*) and other types of acer trees. This toxin is most concentrated in the tree's helicopter seeds during autumn and early winter, and in young saplings during spring. However, it can also be present in the leaves and other parts of the tree.

How Much Sycamore is Dangerous?

Research suggests that consuming just 50 sycamore seeds could be deadly for a horse. However, the reaction to Hypoglycin A can vary widely among different horses. Young horses and those grazing on overgrazed or parched land are especially vulnerable. Different trees may have varying levels of the toxin, so it's crucial to take steps to keep your horses away from sycamore seeds and seedlings. You can even have seeds, leaves, and seedlings tested for Hypoglycin A through the Royal Veterinary College Diagnostic Service.

Signs and Symptoms of Sycamore Poisoning

Keep an eye out for these warning signs:

- Excessive sweating
- Reluctance to move or walk
- Muscle weakness, stiffness, or tremors
- Depression or unusual behaviour
- Signs of colic, even while still eating
- Increased or laboured breathing
- Elevated heart rate
- Dark urine (red or brown)



- Weakness or collapse

Your horse may seem weak, have trouble standing, and experience breathing difficulties, yet still want to eat. If you notice any of these symptoms or suspect poisoning:

1. **Call your vet immediately.**
2. **Remove the horse from the field and into a clean, well-bedded stable.**
3. **Isolate other horses from the area.**
4. **Follow your vet's instructions closely.** Treatment will focus on minimising the clinical effects of the condition.

Diagnosing Atypical Myopathy

If your horse is diagnosed with atypical myopathy, they will likely exhibit a high temperature, rapid pulse, and fast breathing. Blood and urine tests can confirm the diagnosis, but your vet may begin treatment right away as a precaution.

Treatment for Atypical Myopathy

Quick diagnosis and treatment are essential for your horse's survival. Your vet will aim to manage the symptoms, which may include pain relief and intravenous fluids. Often, horses will need to be referred to an equine hospital for specialised care. Sadly, around three-quarters of horses affected by atypical myopathy do not survive. If you're worried about a horse you've lost or one currently suffering, our team offers support for pet loss.

Preventing Atypical Myopathy in Horses



Given the severity of atypical myopathy, it's natural to want to take every precaution to prevent sycamore poisoning. Here are some recommended steps:

- **Remove sycamore trees** and other poisonous trees if possible, ideally during the summer or mid-winter when toxin levels are at their lowest. Replace them with native, non-poisonous trees to provide shelter while minimising environmental impact.
- **Keep horses away** from paddocks with sycamore trees when the helicopter seeds are dropping or seedlings are sprouting.
- **Test for Hypoglycin A** in seeds, leaves, and seedlings in your fields through the Royal Veterinary College Diagnostic Service (note that this may incur a fee).
- **Fence off areas** around poisonous trees and dispose of any seeds or leaves safely away from your horses.
- **Regularly collect and remove sycamore seeds** or rake them up—consider using a paddock vacuum if necessary.

- **Remove young saplings** as you see them.
- **Check neighbouring areas** for sycamores, as seeds can blow in the wind.
- **When grass is limited**, feed your horse forage like hay in haynets or feed racks to keep them from eating fallen seeds during autumn and early winter.
- **Avoid grazing in overgrazed fields**, as this increases the risk of your horse eating sycamore seedlings.
- **Don't overstock** your pasture.
- **Limit your horse's turnout**, ideally stabling them overnight.
- **Be vigilant** about signs of this disease and act quickly if your horse shows any symptoms.
- **Check your horse regularly**—aim for at least twice a day.
- **Ensure your vet insurance is up to date.**



By being proactive and staying informed, you can help protect your horse from the dangers of atypical myopathy.