

Liver disease

The liver is responsible for processing nutrients, storing energy, producing proteins, supporting digestion, and removing toxins from the bloodstream. The liver also has an impressive ability to continue functioning despite significant damage, which means that signs of liver disease often do not become obvious until the condition is quite advanced.

Understanding the causes of liver disease and recognising the early warning signs can help improve outcomes for affected horses.



What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis simply means inflammation of the liver. It is not a disease in itself but a description of a process that can occur for many different reasons.

In horses, hepatitis may develop as a result of:

- Bacterial infections
- Viral infections (although these are less common than in people)
- Toxic damage, including poisonous plants such as ragwort
- Certain medications or chemicals
- Parasitic infections, including liver fluke in some cases
- Immune-mediated disease, where the horse's own immune system attacks liver tissue

Occasionally, the exact cause cannot be identified. Inflammation of the liver can range from mild and reversible to severe, resulting in permanent damage or liver failure.

Ragwort

The most important preventable cause...

One of the most significant causes of chronic liver damage in the UK is common ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*).

Ragwort contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids, toxins that permanently damage liver cells. The effects are cumulative, so horses can develop severe liver disease after eating small amounts over many weeks or months.

Although fresh ragwort is usually avoided because of its bitter taste, dried ragwort hidden in hay or haylage remains just as toxic while becoming much more palatable.

Because the liver damage caused by ragwort is irreversible, prevention is far more effective than treatment



Liver fluke

Liver fluke (*Fasciola hepatica*) is a parasite commonly found in sheep and cattle that is increasingly recognised as a cause of liver inflammation (hepatitis) in horses.

The parasite has a complex life cycle involving mud snails that thrive in wet grazing. Horses become infected by eating vegetation contaminated with the infective stage of the parasite.

Although horses are not the parasite's preferred host and infection remains relatively uncommon, liver fluke should be considered in horses with unexplained liver disease, particularly if they graze wet pasture or share grazing with sheep or cattle. Vets may recommend specific testing if liver fluke is suspected.

Clinical signs of liver disease

Because the liver has such a large reserve capacity, many horses show only vague signs in the early stages. Symptoms may include:

- Weight loss
- Reduced appetite
- Poor performance
- Lethargy
- Dull coat
- Photosensitisation, where unpigmented skin becomes painful, inflamed and crusty after exposure to sunlight
- Mild recurrent colic
- Diarrhoea
- Jaundice (yellow colouring of the gums or whites of the eyes)
- Behavioural changes, including dullness, disorientation or head pressing



If left untreated, severe liver disease can progress to hepatic encephalopathy, a condition in which toxins normally removed by the liver affect brain function, causing neurological signs.

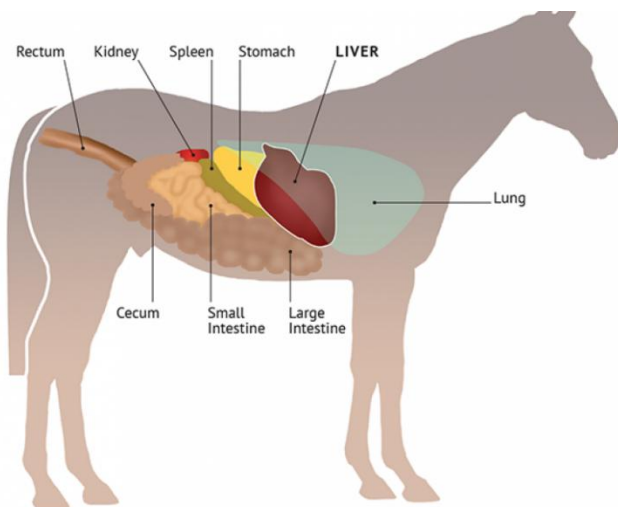
How is liver disease diagnosed?

Your vet may recommend:

- Blood tests to assess liver enzymes and liver function
- Ultrasound examination of the liver
- Liver biopsy to determine the nature and severity of disease
- Additional tests for infectious or parasitic causes, including liver fluke where appropriate



Early diagnosis is important because the sooner treatment starts the more likely it is to be successful.



Treatment

Treatment depends on the underlying cause.

Management may include:

- Removing the cause of liver injury wherever possible
- Dietary adjustments to reduce the liver's workload
- Supportive medications
- Antibiotics if bacterial infection is identified
- Anti-inflammatory or immunosuppressive medication in selected immune-mediated cases
- Specific antiparasitic treatment if liver fluke is

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Prognosis

The prognosis varies considerably. Horses with mild or reversible hepatitis often recover well, whereas advanced liver fibrosis or cirrhosis carries a much poorer prognosis.



Prevention

While not every cause of hepatitis can be prevented, horse owners can greatly reduce the risk of liver disease by:

- Regularly removing ragwort from grazing.
- Checking hay and haylage for contamination.
- Avoiding overgrazed paddocks.
- Monitoring horses grazing wet pasture where liver fluke may be present.
- Seeking veterinary advice promptly if any signs of liver disease develop.



When should you contact your vet?

Arrange a veterinary examination if your horse develops unexplained weight loss, jaundice, persistent lethargy, behavioural changes, poor performance, or unusual sensitivity to sunlight.

Take-home message

The liver has an extraordinary ability to heal, but only if disease is recognised before extensive damage occurs. Hepatitis simply means inflammation of the liver and has many possible causes, including infections, toxins and parasites. Ragwort remains the leading preventable cause of chronic liver disease, while liver fluke is an emerging diagnosis in some grazing environments. Good pasture management, careful forage selection and early veterinary investigation of any suspicious signs offer the best chance of protecting your horse's liver health.



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