

Overview

Ryegrass staggers affects most farmed species, and occurs during the warmer months.

Affected animals appear “drunk” and are worse affected when disturbed. Young animals appear to be more susceptible than adults, and unfortunately there is no known cure other than removal from the affected pasture. The disease will resolve, however death may occur due to misadventure (e.g. drowning, falling down hills).

Ryegrass staggers occurs when animals grazing perennial ryegrass eat large amounts of a toxin produced by ryegrass endophyte, a fungus that grows inside the plant. The endophyte also produces another toxin that is important to protect the plant from destruction by insects, in particular the Argentine stem weevil.

Ryegrass staggers is usually seen late summer to early autumn, especially in dry years when stock graze down close to the ground, but can also occur in spring when stock are grazing large amounts of seed heads.

Causes & Symptoms

It occurs in alpaca, sheep, cattle, deer and horses and the signs are usually seen when animals are disturbed and forced to move.

The initial signs are a subtle head tremor and twitching of the skin muscles. This can then develop into a more obvious head nod, swaying and a staggering motion, and can further worsen to a stiff-legged walk and collapse. After a while the animal recovers. Deaths tend to be accidental following injury such as drowning after a fall into water, or being caught in fences.



A GUIDE TO Ryegrass Staggers

Management/ Prevention/ Treatment

Affected animals should be shifted to ‘safe’ pasture (endophyte free ryegrass or another species of grass such as tall fescue, Lucerne, red clover or chicory) or given supplementary feed such as hay, temporarily. However, it should be noted that the toxin can remain present in hay. Hay cut in early summer, ie December, should be safe.

Movement of the animals should be slow and as stress-free as possible, as this may trigger the onset of staggers and cause injury.

Attempts should be made to avoid hard grazing of ryegrass. This may be difficult during dry summers but can be minimised by feeding additional supplements (such as maize or silage) and shifting stock frequently to prevent pasture cover becoming low.

There are products available that bind to the toxin and minimise its absorption from the gut. Summer Tonic can be added to hay or silage or used as a drench.

Other longer term but more expensive options include re-sowing pastures with a species of ryegrass with ‘safe’

endophyte that provides protection against insect pests without causing ryegrass staggers. Susceptibility is also highly heritable so breeding from only unaffected animals will in time create a more resilient group.

When to call us

- If you notice staggering, head tremors or other neurological signs; the vet should rule out other more sinister causes of neurological dysfunction, which may require immediate treatment.
- To purchase your Summer Tonic to aid in recovery and prevent others becoming affected.

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