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Equine Hospital

LIVER FLUKE

The liver fluke, (*or Fasciola Hepatica*), a flatworm with suckers, is found in the bile ducts of the liver. It is flat, leaf-shaped and a pale brown colour, with tiny sharp spines that irritate the bile ducts and can cause damage to the liver tissue. The adult, which is usually about 2cm to 3cm long, lays its eggs in the bile ducts. The eggs pass into the intestine and are excreted via the dung. If the eggs enter water, they hatch into small larvae known as miracidia. These swim around until they find a small water snail. After entering the snail they encyst (enclose themselves in a sac) and become dormant. After about six weeks they hatch into tiny tadpole-shaped cercariae. These attach themselves to water plants, usually grass, as metacercariae. When the plant is eaten by the animal the metacercariae penetrate the intestinal wall, enter the abdominal cavity and start eating their way into the liver. After another six weeks or so, they make their way to a bile duct to reproduce.

With the wet weather we have had for the last 2 years liver fluke has become a serious problem for many sheep and cattle, particularly those grazed in marshy or boggy fields. Very little is known about liver fluke in horses, however they appear to be more resistant to fluke than cattle and sheep. The most common sign is chronic anaemia of non-specific origin. There may also be soft dung and a tendency to a dry coat and weight loss. Mild jaundice can also be a feature. The more severe signs (including death) found with liver fluke infestation in cattle and sheep are rare in horses.

Analysis of dung for the presence of fluke eggs can be undertaken. However this is not very reliable because the immature fluke that cause the liver damage, as they migrate, do not produce eggs. Even when adult egg-producing fluke are present the egg production itself can be intermittent. For this reason a negative test for fluke eggs does not mean the horse is clear. If there is a history of cattle and sheep in the same area being affected by fluke it would be assumed that co-grazing horses will have some degree of infestation.

Liver fluke can be treated in horses with a wormer containing triclabendazole given orally. (Please note that there are currently no such products licensed for use in horses). Drugs used to treat fluke in cattle and sheep can be toxic for horses. Please phone for further information 01555 660000 (option 3).

