

# Ask A Vet: Wet Weather Brings on Nightshade Poisoning Problems

*Sunday, August 9, 2015*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We keep our 4-H steers and horses in a small paddock around the barn. I found some nightshade growing around the buildings in the paddock and our club leader told us it can be a problem for the animals. What should I watch for and how is the best way to get rid of it?

-Foraker 4-Her

Dear Reader,

A very timely question indeed - in the last few days I have treated several cases of nightshade poisoning of horses in our practice area. Each one has been in a location where the horses are in a small paddock around the barns or stable where the grass has been grazed down and they are picking away at nightshade.

Our wet spring and summer growth of plants in lots and pastures has brought on some early problems with nightshade poisoning. Under normal conditions animals will only eat nightshade if there is no other forage available as it is unpalatable, but if there is nothing else to eat they are apt to nibble enough to make them sick. All parts of the plant are highly toxic even when dried out so it is especially dangerous in hay and prepared feeds. As little as one pound can kill an horse and it affects all animals, including pets. In wet weather, especially in the fall, the plants become less bitter and curious animals will often consume small amounts if they are hungry. In cattle and horses even these small amounts can cause abdominal pain, unthriftiness, depression, diarrhea, incoordination, convulsions, and possible death. Pets sometimes eat the berries which are higher in toxicity.

Nightshade tends to grow around buildings and fence lines, so your dry lot around the barn is an ideal location for it to be found. The fact that it is still very toxic when dried out makes it necessary to pull it up and burn it or dispose it where it won't be available to animals.

The major toxin is solanine and you should call your veterinarian immediately if you suspect your animal is affected. Black nightshade has tomato like (same plant family) leaves, tiny white flowers that become green berries. These berries turn blackish purple in the fall and pets sometimes will ingest them. Bitter nightshade resembles black nightshade except the stems are climbing, the flowers are purple, and the ripe berries are red. Horsenettles are also in the same family but are rarely ingested except in processed feeds.

Nightshade is the most common plant poisoning in our practice area. It can be a real problem for horses and livestock that have no other available forage or when it is baled up and fed. Horses poisoned by nightshade often stagger or wobble in their gait and are depressed. Your veterinarian will need to determine if the cause is nightshade, West Nile, encephalitis, mold toxicity, or trauma.

Thanks for the great question and now is the time to rid your barnyard and fence lines of this dangerous toxic plant.

-Dr. Jerry Sellon