

****ASK THE TAFE TEAM****

With Rural Studies Teacher, Darryl Aspinall

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Question: Should I be concerned about my horses getting 'bighead'?

Answer: If your horses are grazing exclusively on pastures which are high in oxalates such as buffel, setaria, kikuya, green panic and guinea grass, you need to be aware of the possibility of "big head". Tropical grasses high in oxalates significantly interfere with a horse's ability to utilize the calcium, as the oxalate acts like a coating around the calcium which can stop the calcium from breaking down in the digestive process and being absorbed by the horse. This can lead to a calcium deficiency in the horse.

'Big Head' is a severe calcium deficiency caused by a diet low in calcium and excessive in phosphorus. Where phosphorus levels are at rates much higher than the calcium level, the phosphorus will interfere with the horse's ability to absorb calcium. The ideal ratio for horses is two parts calcium to one part phosphorus, and this ratio should not be less than 1:1. Where these feed ratios result in the phosphorous levels being too high, horses will use calcium from their bones to keep blood calcium levels 'normal'. If this occurs over prolonged periods of time, bones become fibrous and weak.

Symptoms of horses with a severe calcium deficiency include:

- Facial swelling giving the horse a 'bighead' appearance
- Shifting, lameness and, generally, sore bones and joints
- Loss of condition
- Noisy breathing during exercise
- Loose and shifting of teeth

'Bighead' can be diagnosed through a physical examination of your horse by a veterinarian, who will also do a diet analysis to determine the cause and then provide advice on the feed ratios required for your horse. Horses with 'bighead' can be treated, depending on whether the cause is an imbalanced diet or oxalated pastures.

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