

# Why sycamores threaten your horses

Atypical Myopathy is a concern for horse owners at this time of year.



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**A** typical Myopathy, also known as 'Sycamore Poisoning' or 'Seasonal Pasture Myopathy', can lead to very expensive vet bills or even the death of a horse. It is caused when horses eat the 'helicopter seeds' and seedlings of the sycamore tree resulting in a severe and potentially fatal muscle disorder.

The seeds and seedlings contain a toxin known as Hypoglycin A (HGA) which affects vital organs including the respiratory system and heart. The highest concentrations of toxin are found in the helicopter seeds in autumn and early winter, and saplings in the springtime. It can also be found in the leaves.

Research suggests that as few as 50 sycamore seeds could be fatal, however different horses seem to have different reactions to the toxin. This could be due to genetic differences or different grazing habits.

Horses and ponies of any age, breed, sex and height can develop Atypical Myopathy although there is evidence that young horses may be more severely affected. This could be because they are outside more which increases their chances of ingesting the sycamore seeds.



A typical sapling from a sycamore tree seen in the springtime.

**Survival rates in affected horses is only around 30-40% and is highly dependent on rapid diagnosis and treatment.**

It is important to note that your horse may appear weak, have difficulty breathing or standing but may still want to eat. If you notice any of the above symptoms or you are concerned that your horse may have been poisoned:

1. Call your vet
2. Remove the horse from the field immediately to a well bedded stable area
3. Remove other horses from the field
4. Follow your vet's advice carefully.

**Sadly there is no anti-toxin available but if your horse survives the first couple of days of treatment there is a good chance of recovery although it could take several months.**

#### Reducing the risk of atypical myopathy

- Check your paddocks and surrounding area for sycamore/acer trees as 'helicopter seeds' can travel up to 200m.
- Where possible remove sycamore or poisonous trees and replace them with native non-poisonous trees
- Avoid letting horses graze pastures with overhanging sycamore trees in autumn and spring
- Clear sycamore leaves and seeds from grazing areas
- Remove young sapling plants if you see them
- If paddocks have to be used, fence off areas around poisonous trees
- Do not overstock or overgraze
- Limit your horses' turnout time and stable overnight
- Provide clean, easily accessible water
- Provide access to adequate grass and feed supplementary forage during the autumn and spring months
- Avoid feeding off the ground

**Atypical myopathy is not contagious and can only affect horses that ingest the toxin.**

The condition is becoming more frequent across Ireland and the continent. Climate change may have a role to play by increasing the toxin concentration in seeds, or increasing production of seeds or the dispersal of them during adverse weather conditions.