

What's Lurking in Your Hay?

The baler machine may catch more than hay during the harvest, causing potential health hazards for your horse.

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Sometimes you get more than you expected inside a bale of hay. Anything that happens to be in the wrong place when the baler machine comes along will get compressed into flakes right along with the forage that's being harvested. Examples include crushed soda cans, crumpled tin signs, paper bags and the carcasses of small wild animals. Rodents and rabbits are often common victims. Such decomposing remains are the biggest concern to horse owners because they can contain the deadly bacteria *Clostridium botulinum*.

There are 7 types of botulism toxin, labeled A-G, and all of them are commonly found in soil where they can produce toxins when mixed with decaying plant or animal debris. Type C is known as "carrion botulism" because it's the strain that can be found in the decomposition of a carcass. Though there is a vaccine for one type of botulism toxin (Type B), there is not one currently for Type C. Instead, veterinarians rely on expensive anti-serum and supportive therapy in attempts to save an afflicted horse. Unfortunately, by the time botulism poisoning is diagnosed through definitive lab tests, the horse may already have succumbed to the symptoms.

A horse infected with botulism Type C can show signs of the disease anywhere from a few hours to up to 10 days of ingesting toxic feed. Because the bacteria affect the nervous system, the horse develops a wobbly gait, loses the ability to raise his head and has difficulty standing. Without the ability to swallow, the horse begins to drool. The ultimate cause of death is respiratory arrest: The horse stops breathing.

To protect your horse from this poisoning, be sure to inspect each bale of hay. Observe flakes of hay before tossing it into your horse's corral or stall and check for any foreign objects. If your horse refuses to eat what appears to be perfectly good hay, check for unusual or foul odors. By being observant, you could save your horse from consuming a potentially deadly meal.