FACTS ABOUT

Horse dung

The British Horse Society

Facts about horses' dung

Horse dung is …

- Harmless to humans and animals
- Mainly digested grass
- Quickly biodegradable
- Good for biodiversity
- Useful in a compost bin in small amounts

Unlike dog faeces, dung from a healthy horse presents no threat to human health but horses depositing dung on a popular path is often given as a reason against horse access or as a point of conflict.

Horses are not ridden out for the purpose of defecating, as is often the case with dogs. Horses dung about eight times a day, thus many will not dung when out for an hour's hack. They may dung if frightened or if at a place where they have previously been distressed.

Although horses' dung is not harmful, it can be unpleasant if it cannot be avoided by passing feet or wheels, particularly for a wheelchair, pushchair or bike which is then put in a car.

The BHS strongly encourages riders and carriage-drivers to be aware of their horses dunging on paths and the potential impact on other users. While some horses indicate that they are about to dung by their behaviour, many will not even slow down and a rider may be unaware of dung being passed.

It is often suggested that riders or carriage-drivers should dismount if a horse has dunged to pick up and remove or at least kick aside any dung from the trodden path. This is rarely practical, even if a rider is aware that dunging has occurred, because it may not be safe or possible to dismount and remount.

Many riders are unable to mount without a mounting block because of limited mobility or the strain on the horse of mounting from the ground. In addition, a rider usually has most control from on the horse's back; the moments between the ground and saddle are high risk and the environment, such as traffic or livestock, may increase the risk.

If there is local concern about horses' dung at a particular site, and conditions permit, it may be feasible to retain or create a soft surface over part of the path width, suitable for horses, to encourage riders to use of one side of a route so the other side will be dung-free. This can be done without a physical barrier or change in surface by signs on posts or on the surface that encourage riders to Keep Left (for example) and explaining the reason. Alternatively, a central 'green' strip with two outer hard surface strips will encourage horses to use the central strip, leaving cyclists and pedestrians to use the firmer outer lanes. A central strip provides optimum head room for the tallest users (riders) on tracks with overhanging vegetation from the sides. Where a softer surface is not feasible, signs may still have the desired effect. A recommended notice is available from the BHS.

Zoonoses and Horse Manure

Zoonoses are 'diseases that can be transmitted from other animals to humans' or 'diseases that normally exists in other animals, but also infect humans'.

Jane Greatorex, Department of Medicine, University of Cambridge, discusses the risk of zoonoses following exposure to horse manure on public rights of way:

Risk of zoonoses following exposure to horse manure on public rights of way

Two main pieces of evidence:

- Does Horse Manure Pose a Significant Risk to Human Health? Document prepared in the USA for use in Master Planning processes, trail planning/development and other public meetings where horse manure poses significant health risks to humans. Author was Adda Quinn, who was employed with a nationally (US) known research institute for 21 years prior to her retirement. She has done research both on global climate change and contaminated soil and groundwater issues. As a trail advocate, she has provided research results in a variety of regulatory debates, both nationally and locally. This document was used by a group called the California State Horsemen.
- Literature search using PubMed on horses AND zoonoses; kept deliberately broad to find as many references as possible. If you search medical databases on 'horses AND manure AND risk of infection' you come up with zero.

1 Review of Does Horse Manure Pose a Significant Risk to Human Health?

Chemicals in horse manure

Primary chemical constituents ore the same as harmless household and agricultural fertilizer. Based on its chemical constituents horse manure should not be considered toxic.

Pathogens of concern

Various references cited:

- Summary was that the only organisms that merited further investigation were Cryptosporidium parvum and Giardia Lambila (both parasites). Non-fatal. Cause diarrhoea. May cause prolonged disease in the immunocompromised.
- Some evidence that foals and their lactating mothers may carry these organisms but they are unlikely to be out hacking on rights of way. No research done on adult animals until 1993.
- Private study by University of Tulane, concluded that: 'use of horses for recreational riding is unlikely to pose a significant risk of environmental contamination from Cryptosporidium of equine origin, nor is it likely to create a significant threat to human health from either of these pathogens'.
- Size of study was criticised (91 horses). Second study undertaken by Colorado State University Fort Collins sampling horses on trails between the ages of three and 30. Of 300 horses only one was found positive for C parvum. He was 24 years old and in poor health. Conclusion of this study was: 'it can be concluded that the adult recreational trail horse population is not likely to be a significant source of Cryptosporidium environmental contamination in water shed areas'.

Conclusion of the study

Horse manure is a solid waste excluded from federal EPA [USA] solid waste regulation because it neither contains significant amounts of hazardous chemicals, nor it exhibits

hazardous characteristics. The chemical constituents of horse manure are not toxic to humans. Horse guts do not contain significant levels of the two waterborne pathogens of greatest concern to human health risk, neither do they contain significant amounts of the bacteria E. coli 0157: H7 or Salmonella.

2 Literature search

Found 216 references. Vast majority concern exotic viral illnesses a) not found in this country b) not transmitted by the faecal oral route.

A single UK reference involving E coli 015:7 in children who visited an inner city open farm in Sheffield. The organism was isolated from a cow, three breeds of pig, two breeds of sheep, two breeds of goat and one horse.

Checked through all the medical literature for 'E coli 015:7 and horse' – no references at all. Remainder of European references are to do with consumption of horse meat.

Review article on 'Equine zoonotic disease risks in vet medicine' from Canada. Article highlighted several organisms found in sick animals but cited no direct evidence of transmission in majority of cases. Two cases of vet students infected following treating horses for C parvum, some cases of ringworm following direct contact. MRSA following treatment of hospitalised horse.

Reference from South Africa of a gardener who may have acquired a Streptococcal infection from fresh horse manure in his garden but they could not isolate the organism, either from the manure or from his garden.

Conclusion

No evidence in the medical literature that horse manure would pose any significant risk to human health when deposited on public rights of way.

Jane Greatorex November 2006

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