Every horse owner is aware of the dangers of ragwort, but many of us view the buttercup as a harmless 'wildflower'.

Buttercup toxicity in horses is a relatively low risk and owners should not be unduly worried, however vets across the country are seeing more cases of buttercup problems due to the changes in our climate and the overgrazing of many horse paddocks.

**Clinical signs of buttercup toxicity**

Buttercups are members of the Ranunculus plant species and in the fresh state contain a toxin 'glycoside ranunculin' that causes irritation on contact with sensitive skin such as the lips and muzzle of our horses. This 'contact dermatitis' can also occur on the lower limbs, and pink skin is more susceptible. Buttercups are most irritant during flowering as the flowers contain more toxin and wet weather enhances the irritating effects of the toxin making summer showers a riskier period.

The toxic effects of buttercups due to ingestion are rarely a problem with horses owing to the bitter burning taste that the plant has. However, horses on poor grazing with little forage may be tempted by buttercups and toxicity can result in excessive salivation, colic and diarrhoea if eaten in large quantities. Beware of fat ponies in starvation paddocks!

It is very important that any other potential causes of dermatitis are ruled out, especially the photosensitisation seen with horses suffering from liver disease. All horses with severe sunburn like lesions on the muzzle, or mud-fever like lesions on the white lower limbs should have a blood test to check for abnormal liver enzymes. If blood results are normal then buttercups could be the problem.

The good news is, any problems caused by buttercups will quickly resolve following removal from the offending pasture. Treat any dermatitis lesions with a soothing antibiotic cream such as 'Flamizine'. Scabs are often painful to remove and should be left for a few days covered in cream to soften before trying to remove them. Only in extreme cases will the horse require antibiotics.

Once the plant is cut and dried out the toxin dissipates and the plant is harmless. So don’t worry if you have hay or haylage containing dried buttercups.
Do I need to remove the buttercups from the pasture?

Eliminating buttercups from pasture is no easy task. Buttercups are very invasive and thrive on poor soil conditions such as wet, compacted land. Buttercups tend to be a bigger problem in ‘fat’ paddocks reserved for overweight/laminitic ponies, these fields tend to have less grass and poorer soil which allows the buttercups to thrive. One effective means of reduction is to aerate and drain the land, harrowing will also break up any runners and slow the growth of the plant.

Buttercups can be killed by spraying, but spraying should be done when the buttercups are actively growing, usually at the rosette stage and before flowering, repeat applications may be required as it is difficult to get control from just one application. Grass should be encouraged to grow which may require applying low levels of appropriate fertiliser. It is essential to remove horses from pasture for at least two weeks following application of chemicals or fertilisers to ensure the pasture is safe.

What if removing the buttercups is not an option?

Sometimes removal of the buttercups is just not an option. As they usually only affect one or two members of the herd many yards may not be willing to try to eradicate the buttercups. So what can you do if your horse is in a field of buttercups?

If your horse has white lower legs, then turnout boots will help prevent contact with the plants. Sensitive muzzles can be more problematic, you can try to apply a barrier cream such as Sudocrem to try to protect from the buttercup contact. Another option might be a full face flymask or nose net to cover the front of the muzzle, or even a grazing muzzle with a large hole in the bottom so your horse can eat normally but the front and sides of the nose are protected from contact with buttercups.

Alternatively, you could supplement hay in the field to reduce the amount of time your horse spends grazing. Or, as a last resort, take a strimmer or lawn mower and remove the flowers from the plants as its the flowers that are the most toxic. For really sensitive horses though, they may just have to be removed from the field.

If you have any questions about Buttercups, please feel free to contact me for advice.