

The law and management of public access rights vary widely between the four countries of the United Kingdom. Practical elements of the following advice apply in all of them but the law in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from in England and Wales.

Riders and drivers of horses are referred to generically as equestrians.

More advice is available on www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice.

IMPORTANT This guidance is general and does not aim to cover every variation in circumstances. Where it is being relied upon, The Society strongly recommends seeking its advice specific to the site.

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Facts about horses' dung

Faeces from horses, also called dung or droppings, is ...

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

The term manure can be defined as rotted dung which has been stored for some time and is semi-decomposed, but is also sometimes used as a term for fresh dung, especially for an audience for which it may be a more familiar word.

Unlike dog faeces, which is toxic to humans, dung from a healthy horse presents no threat to human health, but horses depositing dung on a popular path or beach 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, unlike dogs which may be walked for that purpose alone. Horses dung about eight times a day, so many will not dung during an hour's hack. They may dung if frightened or if at a place where they have previously been distressed. 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.

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 or taken indoors.

In 2021, [questions were asked in Parliament](#)¹ about clearing dung from roads and 'footpaths', with the response that equestrians are not required to clear dung as it is not toxic.

Also in 2021, the value of dung for biodiversity has been recognised and grazing by 'natural' herds of ponies has been established on a number of sites, such as RSPB 'The Lodge', Knepp estate and Ashdown Forest, as part of integrated cross-species grazing management and to improve diversity.

The BHS strongly encourages riders and carriage-drivers to be aware of their horses dunging on paths and the potential impact on other users.

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 for a rider, though may be feasible for a driver. Even if a rider is aware that dunging has occurred, 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 when mounted; the moments between the ground and saddle are high risk and the environment, such as other users or livestock, may increase the risk.

¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs written question answered on 17 March 2021

If there is local concern about horses' dung at a particular site, and conditions permit, it may be feasible to retain or create a porous surface over part of the path width, and maintain it as suitable for horses, and to encourage riders to use that width 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. Suggested wording is available from the BHS.

On routes which equestrians share with other users where a bound surface is needed, the BHS recommends a rubber-crumb-grit compound bound with polymer or resin as the best solution with many benefits over asphalt for all users, one of which is that it is porous so dung will more quickly dissipate than on asphalt or compacted stone.

Where equestrians have used a car park or other facility and horses have passed dung, the BHS recommends that they collect it and remove it from site if in a vehicle, or dispose of it along a fenceline or corner with vegetation where other people are unlikely to tread. If not in a vehicle where a shovel can be carried, tying a plastic bag to the saddle allows dung to quickly be scooped up to be carried to an appropriate place close by.

If any equestrian establishment takes or has clients frequently riding through a residential area or along routes which are used with pushchairs, wheelchairs or mobility scooters, it is recommended that someone regularly follows to remove any dung.

Dung being left where others pass is a common criticism of equestrians which makes it harder for the BHS and others to negotiate new or improved access, irrespective of history or the harmless nature of dung.

Zoonoses and horse dung

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

The following is from the work of Dr Jane Greatorex, Department of Medicine, University of Cambridge, who discussed the risk of zoonoses following exposure to horse faeces on public rights of way in 'Risk of zoonoses following exposure to horse manure on public rights of way'. The two main pieces of evidence cited were:

- *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 faeces poses significant health risks to humans. Author Adda Quinn, 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 medical databases are searched on 'horses AND manure AND risk of infection' the result was zero when tried.

Review of does horse manure pose a significant risk to human health?

Chemicals in horse manure

Primary chemical constituents are 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*.

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 found. 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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