



“Esophageal Choke”

“Esophageal choke” is a serious disease process in horses and one that should not be taken lightly. An episode of “Choke” that is not detected promptly and treated accordingly, can lead to severe complications and even the loss of the patient. However, a short lesson in symptoms, causes and treatment can help an educated horseman / horsewoman attain complete recovery, with a good prognosis.

It should first be understood that the term “choke” is used quite differently in the equine world than that of human medicine. This term refers to an obstruction of the esophagus. Affected animals may be quite stressed, but since their trachea is not obstructed, they are still able to breathe. This condition can be brought about by a variety of causes including trauma, inflammation, tumors, congenital disorders, foreign bodies, and most commonly, a feed impaction within the esophagus.

As a caretaker or horse owner, early recognition of the esophageal obstruction is key to a successful outcome. An episode of “Choke” should be suspected if one or more of the following symptoms are observed: Pain, retching, and stretching of the neck when the animal attempts to swallow, increased salivation and drooling, foul odor and food material coming from the mouth or nostrils, swelling at the bottom of the neck or poor appetite and depression. If these signs are witnessed, don’t panic. First take all food and water away from the horse and call your veterinarian for an emergency visit. Remember, during an esophageal obstruction, your horse cannot effectively swallow, so everything that goes into his / her mouth has a risk of going down the trachea, leading serious complications like aspiration pneumonia.

Upon arrival, your veterinarian will most likely give sedation, anti-inflammatory drugs, and lavage the esophagus through a nasogastric or “stomach” tube in attempts to relieve the obstruction. In the majority of cases, this is all that is needed to alleviate the condition. If the “Choke” is more severe, the horse may need to go under general anesthesia to relax the esophagus enough to allow removal of the blockage. Depending on the severity of the choke, your veterinarian may also advise that an endoscopic view of the esophagus be taken to determine the extent of the damage.

Often, there are predisposing factors which precipitate this condition. Horses with an increased risk of becoming obstructed include those with difficulty chewing food due to poor dental health, horses allowed to eat during recovery from sedation, anesthesia or exhaustion, horses with the habit of gorging or “bolting” their food, and horses with any other esophageal disorder such as stricture, diverticulum, megaesophagus, compression or neurologic condition of the esophagus.

To avoid the occurrence of choke, pay close attention to your horse’s water consumption, eating habits and dental health, and talk with your veterinarian about any underlying health problems which may predispose him / her to an esophageal obstruction. Owners who know their horse to be a “greedy eater” can place a large stone (baseball size or larger) or a salt block in the feeder to slow the ingestion of feed. Pelleted feeds and cubed feeds are most often involved in episodes of esophageal obstruction because of their ability to swell with saliva as they are chewed and swallowed, so avoidance of these feeds is advised in horses with a history of “choking”. As with most medical conditions, good precautionary care, careful observation of symptoms, and routine veterinary examinations can dramatically reduce the severity and frequency of “choke” in horses.

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