



Choke

Choke is a commonly seen condition caused by food material or foreign material blocking a horse's oesophagus (food pipe), which takes food from the mouth down to the stomach.

What causes choke?

Choke is usually caused by an obstruction of the oesophagus. The obstruction is usually due to food material- usually dry, coarse material such as hay, or un-soaked sugar beet which rapidly swells when it is eaten- which gets "stuck" after it has been swallowed. We also see foreign bodies, such as pieces of wood etc which can cause an obstruction. Other conditions which affect mastication (chewing) or swallowing, such as dental pain, sedation or injuries to the neck can also cause choke.

What are the signs of choke?

The most obvious signs of choke is food material and saliva coming out of both nostrils and sometimes the mouth. Some horses will panic, and become agitated, often squealing, coughing, gagging and tensing their neck muscles. If choke has persisted for some time, horses can be dull, inappetent (off their food) and cough.

What to do if your horse has choke

Ideally phone the vet as the sooner the obstruction is cleared, the better for your horse. Take away food and allow access to water. If the condition goes un-noticed, horses can breathe in food material which can cause serious lung infections. NEVER give your horse any water or lubricants by mouth syringe/ drench as this can be inhaled with serious consequences.

How do we diagnose choke?

Your vet will usually sedate your horse, to help him/ her relax and then pass a narrow tube into the oesophagus (via the nostril). This not only confirms the obstruction and where it is but also allows treatment, if required. In more complicated cases an endoscope (narrow fibre-optic camera) is used and allows visualisation of the oesophagus and the underlying problem.

How is choke treated?

Some cases will resolve spontaneously on their own as the muscular contractions of the oesophagus, along with saliva production, help push the obstructing food down into the stomach. In many cases, the administration of a sedative will help prevent the horse from tensing and help with this. In other cases the obstruction is gently encouraged with the use of a stomach tube, which is carefully done to avoid causing injury to the delicate tissues of the oesophagus. With some cases of choke, such as caused by eating un-soaked sugar beet, the obstruction is softened and flushed away by warm water passed down the stomach tube- this is very carefully done to avoid your horse inhaling any material and sedation is useful to keep the head position low and aid draining of fluid.

Once the choke is cleared we generally advise feeding grass and soaked, sloppy feeds only for 1-2 days to allow any localised swelling to settle and prevent further episodes of choke.

How is choke prevented?

Regular dental care is paramount in ensuring horses can chew effectively and comfortably. Keep dry feeds which require soaking well away from all horses and ponies and in a secure container in feed rooms (many escapees head straight for the feed room!). Greedy horses which eat very



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quickly can be fed smaller, but more frequent meals and the addition of bricks into the feed bowl will slow the rate of eating. Hay/ haylage can be fed from small-holed nets. Some horses with other conditions of the throat can also be predisposed to choke so please speak to your vet about your individual horse if you are concerned.