

Choke

What it is, how to recognise it and how to treat it

What is choke?

In horses, choke is caused by an obstruction of the oesophagus (unlike humans, where it is an obstruction of the trachea). This is usually caused by your horse eating feed that is too dry, bolting their feed or large treats or eating unsoaked sugar beet. It can also occur in horses with dental issues that are unable to chew their food properly. Food material packs the oesophagus and can swell, preventing your horse from swallowing.



Refluxing food material from the nose of a horse with choke

*Photo from
www.horseprotection.org*

What are the signs of choke?

- Food material coming out the nose
- Frothy discharge from the nose and mouth
- Repeated attempts to swallow
- Coughing
- Extending and flexing the neck
- Distressed and uncomfortable horse
- You may be able to feel the blockage underneath the neck

How do we diagnose choke?

A diagnosis of choke is made on the clinical presentation of your horse, combined with a history of recently eating.

Are there any complications my horse can get from choke?

The biggest risk post-choke is of upper respiratory infections or aspiration pneumonia, which occur when the horse inhales food material. We treat this with antibiotics and anti-inflammatories. If your horse repeatedly chokes there is a risk of oesophageal damage and strictures.

How do we treat choke?

Lots of cases of choke will resolve spontaneously - keep your horse calm and withhold food and water. If the problem hasn't resolved within 20-30 minutes then give your vet a call as they may need assistance to pass the obstruction. Choke is treated with a combination of drugs and passing a stomach tube. We use buscopan to relax the smooth muscle of the oesophagus and painkillers and anti-inflammatories to keep your horse comfortable. If your horse is distressed or anxious around their head, then we will need to sedate them to pass the stomach tube - this makes it less stressful for them. The stomach tube is passed up their nose and into the oesophagus to enable us to lavage the obstruction with warm water until it has cleared.

Aftercare depends on how severe the episode was, but usually includes feeding soft, sloppy feeds for several days, then anti-inflammatories and possibly antibiotics if there is a risk of aspiration pneumonia.

How can I prevent choke?

Always wet down your horses hard feed, and avoid feeding large treats that your horse may swallow whole. Always soak any sugar beet based feeds for the time stated on the bag. If your horse bolts their feed, try feeding smaller amounts more often or using toys to make them work for their feed. Make sure your horse has access to fresh water too at all times.

If you are worried that your horse is choking, please give us a call at the Centre on 01977 652280