



Vet Notes

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Choke

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Recognizing choke in horses

“Choke” in horses is an obstruction of the esophagus. When a horse initially chokes, they may stop eating, isolate themselves from the herd, have excessive salivation and may cough/retch. Once the choke progresses, saliva and feed material begins to come out of their nostrils. Once it is recognized a horse is choking, feed and water should be removed to prevent worsening of the obstruction.

Resolving choke

When your veterinarian determines that a horse is choking on the farm, they will sedate the horse in order to keep their head low to the ground. This helps assure the material coming out of the esophagus will naturally come out of the nostrils rather than going into the trachea. The veterinarian may also administer a medication to relax the smooth muscle portion of the esophagus. Your veterinarian will then need to pass a tube through the nostril and into the esophagus to gently lavage the obstruction.

Some cases of choke are more complicated to resolve and are unable to be cleared in the field. In these cases, the horse may be sent to a hospital. At the hospital, use of an endoscope can help better assess and clear the obstruction. However, this may also be unsuccessful. In these more complicated cases, your options are to proceed with medical therapy to give the horse more time to clear the obstruction on their own or you can try to clear the obstruction under general anesthesia. Medical therapy may involve sedation to keep the horse relaxed and keep the head low, intravenous fluids to keep the horse hydrated, anti-inflammatory medication and antibiotics to prevent development of aspiration pneumonia. Putting the horse under general anesthesia is another option in complicated cases. General anesthesia allows for protection of the airways while the obstruction is cleared. Depending on the case, the veterinarian may determine that they

can clear the obstruction with endoscopy and lavage, or they may recommend a surgical approach.

Secondary Complications

Horses that experience choke are at risk of developing aspiration pneumonia, so this will also need to be treated and monitored. There is also risk of erosion/perforation of the esophagus or development of a esophageal stricture. Endoscopy at the time of choke as well as as follow up will help evaluate the esophagus and determine if there are secondary issues that need to be addressed.

Aftercare

Following resolution of a choke, the patient should be closely monitored for signs of respiratory disease (lethargy, fever, inappetence, increased respiratory rate/effort, cough, nasal discharge). Food should be slowly reintroduced. Their diet should initially consist only of a mash and any hay should be wet.

Risk Factors of Choke

It is important to recognize and address any factors that may predispose your horse to choke:

Dentition: Older horses that do not have many teeth or horses with dental issues may not be able to break down their food adequately, causing them to choke easily.

Behavior: Some horses simply eat too quickly and do not take the time to chew their food adequately, leading to choke.

Sedation: Allowing a sedated horse to eat can result in choke.

Dry/Fibrous feed material: Certain feeds are more likely to cause choke. Beet pulp, pelleted feeds and hay are some common feeds that horses choke on.

Breed predisposition: Megaesophagus is common in Friesians, causing chronic choke issues.

References:

Orsini, J. A., & Divers, T. J. (2014). Esophageal Obstruction. In *Equine emergencies: Treatment and procedures* (pp. 177-180). St Louis, MO: Elsevier Saunders.



Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, Emily received her bachelor's degree in Animal Science and her DVM from The University of Georgia. She has two sisters and three brothers. At eight years old, she was introduced to riding, where her love for horses began. She was 9 when she got her first horse, a PMU foal, and Emily has had her ever since.

Along with her horse, Emily has a cattle dog mix named Jasper! In her spare time, Emily likes walking her dog, hiking, reading, doing yoga, riding her horse, and spending time outdoors.