

Food matter coming from the nostrils is a sign of choke



OUR EXPERT
Colin Mitchell



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Avoiding choke

Choke can be alarming and distressing but the horse is seldom in any danger and should recover fully with correct treatment, says equine vet Colin Mitchell

There is a significant difference between horses and people choking. When a human chokes, there is an obstruction in the windpipe which causes breathing difficulties. Lack of appropriate attention can lead to serious consequences.

If a horse 'chokes', it is due to an obstruction in the oesophagus – the muscular tube which takes food from the throat to the stomach.

There is no obstruction to the windpipe and the horse is not in any immediate danger.

However, it is an uncomfortable condition for a horse and he will cough and retch and is likely to become restless and unsettled.

Saliva and food material may be coughed from the nostrils and mouth. The neck may arch

periodically and the neck muscles can go into visible spasm. Another sign of choke is a bulge in one side of the horse's neck.

What triggers choke?

One of the biggest causes of choke is dental disease. If teeth are in poor condition, it reduces the efficiency of chewing, leading to larger particles of food being swallowed, which can increase the likelihood of an obstruction.

If horses are fed a diet that is either too dry – or, somewhat paradoxically, too wet – they may choke.

It is thought that if a horse rushes to eat food too quickly, due to peer pressure from nearby horses, for example, this can increase the possibility of an obstruction.

Making a diagnosis

The clinical signs listed left, and a history of the horse being normal, until eating, then becoming distressed, will usually be enough to suggest choke as a likely diagnosis.

Occasionally, a vet may pass a flexible camera (an endoscope or gastroscope) down a horse's oesophagus to accurately diagnose the problem.

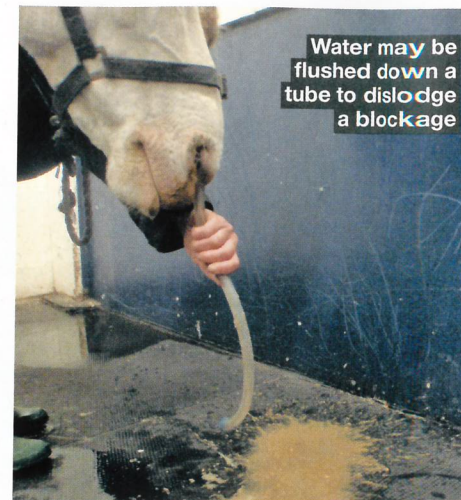
Resolving the issue

Treatment is not always necessary. It would not be uncommon for a vet to be called to a choke as an out-of-hours emergency, to find the blockage has cleared itself by the time they arrive at the yard.

In some cases, just sedating the horse and allowing him to relax will allow the obstruction to pass, or be coughed out.

Sedation also facilitates the passage of a tube via the nose into the stomach, until it reaches the obstruction.

It is sometimes possible to gently pour water down the stomach tube to lubricate and remove the obstruction by a siphon effect.



Water may be flushed down a tube to dislodge a blockage

If this is not possible, it is acceptable to leave the obstruction and re-assess the following day.

Natural breakdown of food and the lubricating effect of saliva will often dislodge smaller obstructions.

Occasionally, this may take a few days and the affected horse may need intra-venous fluids to maintain hydration until the obstruction clears. Surgical removal of the obstruction would not be required.

Preventing choke

There are several things any owner can do, to guard against their horse suffering from choke:-

1. Ensure your horse has regular dental care from your vet, which will help identify and treat dental disease.
2. Adding water to a horse's feed will make it easier for him to swallow. This is particularly relevant if he is older and finds it hard to chew.
3. If a horse is choking because of peer pressure, make changes to his feeding regime to avoid this occurring.
4. To slow down a quick eater, large bricks or smooth stones can be placed in the feed bucket or manger. These prevent the horse from gulping large mouthfuls – instead, he has to use his lips and muzzle to nibble food from around the bricks. ■

Choke: fast facts

- While it can appear alarming and concerning, choke is seldom serious.
- It is usually a single occurrence but if a horse chokes regularly, a vet should investigate what is causing it. There may be management and medical reasons behind the problem.
- Endoscopic examination of the oesophagus, and possibly 'barium swallow' X-rays may be performed if your horse has repeated episodes of choke.
- Regular dental attention from your vet is a cost-effective and simple way to reduce the chances of choke.

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