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EQUINE CHOKE

What is it?

Choke is the informal term for an obstruction of the oesophagus. The oesophagus is the connection between the mouth and the stomach, it is of narrow diameter and can become blocked with food, particularly hay or apples/potatoes.

What are the symptoms?

- Distress
- Head and neck extended
- Salivation
- Food coming out of the nostrils
- Depression if longstanding



Food coming out of the nostrils in a horse with choke.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on clinical signs and confirmed by failure to pass a stomach tube and endoscopy (passing a camera into the oesophagus. Sometimes the obstruction can also be felt along the horses' neck.

How is it treated?

The horse is sedated so that the head hangs low, and given medication to relax the oesophagus. The obstruction is then gently flushed with water via a stomach tube. If this is unsuccessful the procedure can be repeated in 24 hours. Surgery is a last resort for obstructions that cannot be cleared.

How can I prevent choke?

Choke often occurs when hungry, dehydrated horses are fed hay and eat it too quickly. This can be prevented by not feeding the horse directly after hard exercise, and ensuring it always has access to water.

In addition, horses with dental disease or with sharp teeth from infrequent dental care are predisposed to choke. This is because it becomes painful for them to chew their food thoroughly, so food is swallowed with minimal chewing.

Finally, ensure to cut apples and carrots up appropriately prior to feeding.