

What is choke?

By Malcolm Corsar BVM&S Cert. AVP (EP) MRCVS of Central Equine Vets

Choke (oesophageal obstruction) is defined as blockage of the oesophagus - the tube that goes from the mouth to the stomach. This results in the inability to swallow causing regurgitation of saliva, food and water through the nose, accompanied by discomfort.

There are two types of choke:

1) Simple obstruction/primary choke - ingestion of food or inappropriate material, resulting in a blockage of the oesophagus (most common).

2) Secondary/recurrent choke - as a result of a specific oesophageal condition such as a stricture or tumour leading to blockage and food trapping (less common).

What symptoms should you look for?

The symptoms of choke relate to the physical blockage being suffered and can include: drooling of saliva, food/saliva returning down the nostrils, repeated attempts at swallowing, swallowing difficulties, lack of appetite, coughing, arching/spasm of the neck muscles, marked anxiety/stress and in some cases a noticeable mass blocking the oesophagus.

What causes choke?

There are a number of factors that could cause a horse to choke which include:

- Inability to chew food properly/dental problems.
- Horses being greedy and eating too quickly.
- Abrupt change in diet.



Due to the blockage food can return down the nostrils

How do you diagnose and treat choke?

Firstly, and most importantly, if you think your horse may be choking then remove all food and water immediately, call your vet and don't panic.

Depending on the severity of the choke, the vet will sedate the horse to help the oesophagus and horse to relax, encouraging the horse to drop its head. This alone may allow the obstruction to pass into the stomach on its own accord; however sometimes further intervention may be required.

The next step of treatment would be to pass a stomach tube through one of the nostrils down into the oesophagus until the blockage is found. This allows the vet to work out the location of the obstruction. At this point



The oesophagus is the tube that goes from the mouth to the stomach

the vet may be able to pass liquid through the tube to help the matter dissolve and dislodge more easily.

The vet will also administer some pain relief, anti-inflammatories, antibiotics and spasmolytics to relieve the horse during and after the choke episode.

For recurring choke cases, the vet may opt to undertake further investigation and perform endoscopy to complete a thorough examination of the oesophagus to check for any underlying conditions.

Is choke ever fatal?

Choke in horses mostly, is not immediately life threatening as, unlike humans, the horse remains able to breathe as the trapped food is within the oesophagus and is not trapped within the trachea/windpipe that the horse uses for respiration.

However, some horses suffering from choke can aspirate (breathe in) the saliva and food material and this can result in fatal aspiration pneumonia. This is one of the reasons that prophylactic antibiotics are used in cases of choke.

How do you prevent a horse from choking?

As one of the main reasons for horses choking is that they have not chewed their food properly, it is important to make sure that your horse has regular dental care.

Make sure that all hard feeds are appropriately soaked/wetted especially if there is an alteration to the type of feed given. Sloppy feeds rarely, if ever, cause choke.

Ensure any changes to the feed or forage is done on a gradual basis.



Coughing can be another symptom of choke

If the horse is a 'greedy feeder' try to slow the feed intake down. For example, feed from a large, shallow bucket placed on the floor and make sure the horse is fed independently from others to prevent the rapid intake of food.

In older horses, try to ensure they have more frequent dental examinations (perhaps twice yearly) and also ensure they are provided with a diet appropriate to their needs.

Ensure your horse has a fresh water supply at all times.

What to do if you think your horse is choking

- Stay calm, don't panic.
- Remove all food and water from the horse.
- Call your vet immediately.
- Gently massage the neck on the horse's left hand side (this is where the oesophagus is).
- Reassure your horse to try and keep them calm, as choke can be very distressing for both horses and humans.
- Most importantly, remember horses with choke can still breathe; they are just unable to swallow.



Central Equine Veterinary Services Ltd

Edinburgh: 0131 664 5606

Kinross: 01577 863333

info@centralequinevets.co.uk - www.centralequinevets.co.uk

