

Fact Sheet

Choke

What is choke?

Choke occurs when a horse gets food material stuck in their oesophagus (food pipe). Choke is fairly common and looks worse than it is. Unlike humans, if a horse 'chokes' they are still able to breathe but are unable to swallow until the blockage is cleared.



What causes choke?

Choke is most common in greedy horses or ponies as they bolt their food. Horses with dental problems are also more likely to choke due to poor chewing action, therefore it is important to have your horses' teeth checked at least once a year.

Choke can also be due to a horse eating feed that is supposed to be soaked but has not been (such as sugarbeet) or large pieces of food material such as whole carrots.



What are the typical signs of choke?

The first thing most owners will see is their horse standing with a tense, stretched out neck and they may appear to be gagging; this is them attempting to swallow.

Commonly, there is saliva draining from the nostrils, often containing small amounts of food.

Some horses can become very distressed and show signs associated with colic such as sweating and pawing the ground.

Other signs of choke include:

- Salivation
- Loss of appetite
- Coughing
- Lump on the left side of the neck



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What to do when your horse has choke?

If your horse has choke it is best to call your vets either for advice over the phone or, if necessary, to arrange a visit.

Firstly, remove all food from the vicinity and leave the horse to stand still in a calm environment, ideally with their head lowered. If the obstructed food can be felt externally, gentle massage of the affected area may help. It is vital not to bang, hit or force any obvious lump to move, or drench the horse with butter, coca cola or any other foreign liquids.

Plenty of cases will resolve quickly and of their own accord, as the neck muscles relax and the blockage slides down to the stomach.



How to treat choke?

If the horse continues to choke a vet visit will be required and medication given.

It is likely the vet will need to sedate your horse, so they relax the muscles on their neck and allow the obstruction to pass.

They may also pass a tube up the nose and into the oesophagus in order to clear the blockage.

Antibiotics may be necessary if there is a significant risk of the horse inhaling food material and pneumonia occurring.

How to prevent choke?

The mainstay of preventing choke is to increase the time it takes for your horse to eat its food and allow time for them to chew properly:

- Put water in feeds
- Placing large rocks that they have to eat around can also slow them down
- Carrots and apples should be sliced lengthways



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