

Choke: A Veterinary Emergency

What is Choke?

Choke occurs when feed forms a blockage in the esophagus. Unlike humans, horses can still breathe during a choking episode since their trachea (windpipe) is not obstructed. The most common sign of choke is feed material coming from the nostrils after a grain meal. Horses may also hypersalivate, retch/gag, not want to eat, act colicky, or cough.

Causes of Choke

The leading cause of choke is when horses eat their grain too quickly. The feed does not get softened with saliva and forms a firm bolus that gets lodged in the esophagus. Unsoaked beet pulp can also cause choke. Choke can less commonly occur with hay, treats, or other objects. Dental problems can also cause choke due to inadequate chewing, so it is important to schedule a thorough dental exam with your veterinarian following a choking episode.



What To Do If Your Horse is Choking

- Call your veterinarian - choke is an emergency
- Take away food and water
- Keep your horse in a quiet area without stimulation
- Encourage your horse to relax and lower its head - don't do anything to stimulate your horse and cause them to raise their head
- If you feel a lump on the left side of the neck, you can massage it, but usually blockages are further down in the chest.

**DO NOT stick a garden hose in your horse's mouth to try and clear the choke.
This can cause life-threatening aspiration pneumonia.**

Aftercare

- Feed grain as a soupy mash for the next 3 days.
- If your horse has repeated choking episodes, they will need to be fed a soaked mash for life (or no grain).
- To prevent future choking episodes, feed from a large, wide feed pan on the ground. Place a few large, smooth rocks or salt blocks in the dish to slow down eating. There are also slow-feed dishes that are commercially made for this purpose.
- The most common complication of choke is aspiration pneumonia, which is uncommon but can be life threatening if it occurs. To monitor for this complication, take your horse's temperature twice daily for 3-5 days after a choking episode.
- Monitor attitude, appetite, coughing, nasal discharge, and breathing and report any abnormalities to your veterinarian.