



## Equine Newsletter October 2015



**Coombefield Equine Clinic**  
Summerleaze Farm, Axminster

### Choke

#### What is choke?

Choke occurs when food becomes lodged in your horse's oesophagus (the tube that takes food from the back of the mouth to the stomach). Despite its name it is not a blockage of the windpipe. It can affect horses and ponies of all breeds and ages and can be distressing for both you and your horse.



Your horse will try and clear the obstruction. This usually involves coughing combined with the production of a large amount of saliva. As the saliva cannot pass around the obstruction, it builds up and leads to drooling and nasal discharge. This is often the first thing you will notice, a green/white, frothy discharge from both nostrils. The discharge will often contain particles of food material.

Horses that are 'choking' may appear restless, sweat and often stand with their neck and head extended towards the ground. They often appear to be repeatedly swallowing and you may be able to see a swelling on the left side of the neck.

#### What causes choke?

A simple choke can be caused by bolting of feeds, especially if the horse is dehydrated or tired after exercise or when horses break in to the feed room. It can also be caused by food that swells rapidly such as un-soaked sugar beet. Failure to chew food material can also lead to an obstruction. Horses with dental problems or those who do not regularly receive dental attention are at an increased risk of choke.

Feeding horses too soon before they have fully recovered from a sedation is another cause of choke so make sure you give your horse plenty of time to recover before offering any food, your vet will advise how long.

Rarely an abnormality of the oesophagus or surrounding structures can prevent food material from passing normally into the stomach and cause choke.

#### What should I do if my horse has choke?

Don't panic! Choke often looks much worse than it is and many cases of choke will clear on their own. Remove all food and water to prevent your horses from eating and worsening the obstruction. Keep your horse calm, as they are often anxious. Call your vet.

## How is choke treated?

Depending on the severity and duration of the choke your vet may sedate your horse to reduce anxiety and to lower the head to reduce inhalation of food and saliva. Anti-inflammatories and drugs to relax the oesophagus may be given to help the obstruction pass down to the stomach. A stomach tube may be passed if necessary to help flush out the obstructed food material. Once the obstruction has been cleared feeds should be small and well soaked. Grass is normally well tolerated so access to grazing is important. Hay or haylage should be gradually reintroduced over a period of several days.

## How to avoid choke?

While not all cases of choke are preventable, certain management and feeding practices can dramatically reduce the risk.

1. Prevent bolting of feed by splitting large feeds or placing a salt block in the feed bowl.
2. Mix concentrates with a good quality chaff and moisten the feed.
3. Avoid feeding immediately after exercise when your horse may be slightly dehydrated or tired and will not be producing adequate saliva.
4. Regular dental check-ups are very important. If your horse has missing teeth, overgrowths or ulcers they may not be able to chew their food effectively.



Sharp enamel points causing oral ulceration

## Complications associated with choke?

The main complication associated with choke is aspiration pneumonia. This occurs when food material and saliva get accidentally inhaled down the trachea and into the lungs. If your vet suspects pneumonia, your horse will be given antibiotics. Another complication of choke is damage to the oesophagus including stricture formation or rupture. A stricture is basically a narrowing of the oesophagus due to scar tissue formation after the oesophagus has been traumatised by the obstruction.



[www.facebook.com/CoombeFieldEquineDepartment](http://www.facebook.com/CoombeFieldEquineDepartment)

### **EQUINE INFO**

If you would like to speak to an Equine vet or arrange a visit

Please ring 01297 630515

Medicines can be requested via email or by telephone

Email: [equine@axvets.co.uk](mailto:equine@axvets.co.uk)