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Equine Newsletter



Eye problems in horses

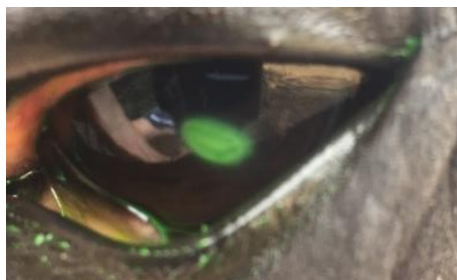
At this time of year with the flies worsening and horses out more we tend to see eye problems more frequently. Sometimes it can be difficult to work out which are more important than others and when to call the vet. Eyes are incredibly fragile but very important structures so it is so important to treat any problems that may occur promptly as needed.

What causes ocular discharge?

Ocular discharge can be caused by a large number of things, it can be a sign of pain and inflammation within the eye caused by damage to the eye such as an ulcer or conjunctivitis or a change in pressure in the eye. These can be the result of an allergic response, neoplasia, trauma, foreign body, fungal, bacterial or viral cause. It can also be an issue with the horse's nasal lacrimal duct which runs down from its eye to the inside of its nostril. As a result, the fluid that normally runs down the inside of the horse's nose to its nostril ends up building up and running out of the horse's eye. Ocular discharge can also be teeth or sinus related.

When deciding on the cause of the discharge we look at a variety of things including whether both eyes are affected, the colour of the discharge and if there is any damage to the eye, for which we often use a temporary stain called fluorescein which is absorbed by any areas of damage in the cornea. We also look at how the horse's eye reacts to light and often look at the eye with an ophthalmoscope to identify if we can see any changes to the structures within the eye and anything within the eye that shouldn't be there for example blood and pus. We also look at the actual shape of the eye and whether there is any blepharospasm (excessive blinking).

Although at the moment with the flies it can be easy to dismiss ocular discharge, however horses often when annoyed by flies can then rub their eyes against themselves, fences etc potentially causing trauma to the eye resulting in ocular ulcers these can be incredibly painful and require prompt treatment. And as discussed above ocular discharge can be caused by such a wide variety of things so as soon as your horse starts developing ocular discharge it is best to call a vet.



What does it mean if my horse slightly closes one eye?

Horses are prey animals so try not to exhibit any signs of pain however the most common reason for a horse to be holding one eye slightly more closed than the other or to be closing one eye completely is pain. The easiest way to assess this is to look at the angle of your horse's eyelashes they should match. If your horse is holding both eyes partially or completely closed it can be that both eyes are very painful. If your horse is blinking excessively this can also be an indicator of pain. If

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your horse is squinting or completely closing one or both eyes it is very important to ring a vet as your horse needs pain relief and the exact cause identifying.

If my horse is holding their eye completely closed how will a vet assess it?

A vet can use local blocks to relax the horse's eyelids to make it easier to examine the eye and identify the cause of the problem. If the horse is so uncomfortable it doesn't want to open their eye at all it is imperative a vet sees it as soon as they can as they are likely to be in high levels of pain and the sooner the eye is treated the more likely we are to be successful.

When should I call a vet?

If your horse is squinting or closing one or both eyes, if you can see anything within the eye, any cloudiness within the eye, if the your horse is blinking excessively, if your horse is reacting abnormally to light, if your horse's eyes appear asymmetrical, if the sclera (the white area around the eye) appears red or there is any ocular discharge as these can all be pain related and the sooner the underlying cause is treated the better for the horse. Unfortunately not all eye conditions can be treated successfully and a very small percentage as a last resort require enucleation (eye removal) hence it is so important to call a vet as soon as a problem is spotted to ensure we have the best possible chances of treating it successfully.

Is it safe to use the eye medications that were previously given by a vet again?

Unfortunately, it completely depends on the cause of the problem as to what eye medications to use. Using the wrong medication can cause significant harm, for example if the horse's cornea is intact but the eye is quite inflamed we will often use topical steroids to reduce the inflammation however if the horse has an ulcer on its eye then applying steroid will prevent healing and will work against the body trying to fix the problem. Instead for ocular ulcers topical antibiotics are used as a first line of treatment. As a result, we highly recommend that you call a vet to discuss any eye problems to discuss it with them before you start any treatment.



How do you treat a horse with an eye problem if they won't let you go near its eye to put drops in?

If a horse is very head shy or is becoming distressed or unwilling to have eye drops and the cause of its eye problem requires treatment, we can place a system called an ocular lavage. An ocular lavage is a long but thin tube that we attach to the inside of the horse's eyelid (through the eyelid with a small needle to place it) and then we can tie the rest of the tube to the horse's head and behind their ear. You can then apply the medication to the end of the tube preventing the need to go near the horse's eye. This system is well tolerated by the horse and can remain in place for several weeks, it can make a big difference to helping treat an eye.

What should I do if my horse injures itself by its eye?

If necessary, we can suture wounds to the eyelids or to the skin near the eye like any other wound and they tend to heal very quickly. With wounds close to the eye it is very important that we also check that there hasn't been any damage to the eye that may require treating. So, it is important for even small wounds around the eye to call a vet.

Eyes are so important to a horse so if ever in doubt it is always best to give us a call on 01297304007

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