



What is Choke?

The term “Choke” actually refers to an obstruction of the oesophagus, as opposed to an obstruction of the trachea when a human chokes.

So what does Choke look like?

The first thing you will notice in a horse that has an oesophageal obstruction is a green often frothy discharge coming out of both nostrils. The discharge usually has food material in it and is due to build up of ingested food in front of whatever is causing the obstruction in the oesophagus. Unlike other species such as the dog, horses can't vomit, so the easiest path for food material to track back up the oesophagus is out through the nose.

Horses that are “choking” often hold their head stretched out, look anxious and may be coughing. They often appear to be trying to swallow and sometimes you can even see a bulge in the left side of their neck where the obstruction is.



What should I do if I think my horse has Choke?

- Call your vet
- Keep your horse calm and try to reassure them as they are often anxious
- Try to prevent your horse from eating any more food

How is Choke treated?

Your vet will often first sedate your horse to reduce anxiety and allow further investigation with a minimum of stress. An anti-spasmodic drug is often used to relax the oesophagus to increase the likelihood of the obstruction passing into the stomach. A naso-gastric tube is often passed up through your horse's nose and down into the oesophagus. This helps to identify how far down the obstruction is and



sometimes your vet maybe able to push the obstruction down into the stomach or potentially flush it down by administering some water into the tube.

The vast majority of “Chokes” in the horse resolve with simple treatment on farm, but if they don’t further investigation and treatment may be required at a referral hospital. Often an endoscope is required to visualise what is causing the obstruction and how serious it is.

What causes Choke?

One of the more common reasons for a Choke to occur is poor teeth. Good teeth are required to chew grass properly and when this doesn’t occur poorly chewed-up grass can lodge in the oesophagus creating an obstruction - just another reason to ensure your horse’s teeth are regularly seen by your vet or a qualified dental technician. Greedy horses eating their carrots and apples too quickly can choke, as can horses which have accidentally swallowed some sort of foreign body.

Complications associated with Choke

The main complication associated with choke is Aspiration Pneumonia. This occurs when food material that has tracked back up the oesophagus due to the obstruction gets accidentally inhaled down the trachea and into the lungs. Even small amounts of food and saliva down in the lungs can create an infection, potentially developing into pneumonia. If your vet suspects that this may be occurring they will most likely start your horse on some antibiotics. The other common complication of choke is the formation of an oesophageal stricture. A stricture is essentially a narrowing of the oesophagus due to scar tissue formation following trauma from the obstruction.