

Horse Health:

Choke

What is it?

The word choke is understandably a worrying term for owners. We immediately think of someone unable to breathe. But in horses, choke is different.

Choke in horses happens when food or another object gets stuck in the oesophagus - the muscular tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach. Unlike people, a horse with choke can still breathe, because the airway isn't blocked. That said, it's still a serious condition that needs prompt veterinary attention.

When the oesophagus is blocked, saliva and food can't reach the stomach. Instead, they build up and often come back out of the nose and mouth. This leads to the classic signs owners see - nasal discharge, difficulty swallowing, drooling, and sometimes obvious discomfort.

What causes it?

There isn't usually just one reason - it's often a mix of factors. The most common causes include:

Dry or poorly chewed food: Pellets, cubes, or dry beet pulp that hasn't been soaked can swell once moistened, forming a sticky plug.

Dental problems: Horses rely on grinding their food into small pieces. If their teeth are painful, missing, or sharp, they can't chew properly, and larger lumps of food are swallowed.

Bolting feed: Some horses eat far too quickly. Food doesn't get chewed enough and can clump in the oesophagus.

Not enough water: Feeding dry food without access to plenty of fresh water increases risk.

Foreign objects: Occasionally, a horse swallows something it shouldn't, such as bits of wood, twine, or large chunks of carrot or apple.

Oesophageal problems: Some horses have a narrowing, weakness, or pouch in their oesophagus, which makes blockages more likely.

Feeding too soon after sedation: Sedatives reduce the swallowing reflex, so food is more likely to go down incorrectly if they eat too quickly afterwards.

Sometimes, choke is just a one-off. If it keeps happening, that's a red flag that something more serious could be going on.

What horses are at risk?

Any horse can choke, but some are more prone, including:

Older horses, especially those with worn or diseased teeth.

Horses with poor dental care.

Fast eaters or those who feel pressured when eating in groups due to competition for food.

Horses fed dry, unsoaked feeds (particularly those that swell with moisture, such as sugar beet).

Horses with a previous history of choke, as scarring can leave the oesophagus narrower.

Horses that are sedated or recovering from sedation and are offered food too soon.

What are the symptoms?

Choke usually happens while the horse is eating or just afterwards.

Owners often notice:

Greenish or slimy fluid (saliva mixed with food) coming from both nostrils.

Lots of drooling.

Coughing or retching movements.

Stretching or arching of the neck.

Anxiety, restlessness, or sweating.

A swelling or firm “lump” on the left side of the neck if the blockage is there.

It's important to know that horses cannot vomit. If you think your horse is “bringing food back up,” it is almost certainly choke.

If choke lasts for a while, horses can become dehydrated, depressed, or stop eating. More concerning, food and saliva can be inhaled into the lungs, causing **aspiration pneumonia**. This is one of the most serious complications and can develop even after the obstruction clears.

How is it diagnosed?

When you call your vet, they'll start with obtaining a thorough history and clinical examination. They'll want to know what your horse was eating, how quickly it came on, and if your horse has had choke before.

Physical examination: They'll feel along your horse's neck for a blockage and check for nasal discharge. Listening to the chest is crucial to pick up early signs of pneumonia.

Passing a stomach tube: This is the main way vets confirm and treat choke. If the tube can't reach the stomach, the blockage is in the way. Gentle flushing with warm water can then help soften and clear it.

Endoscopy: If choke is persistent or recurrent, your vet may pass a camera into the oesophagus to see exactly what's happening and check for damage or narrowing.

Imaging: X-rays or ultrasound may occasionally be used if a complication or foreign object is suspected.

How can it be treated or managed?

The treatment goals are simple: clear the blockage, protect the oesophagus, and prevent complications.

Simple cases

Most uncomplicated cases can be managed with:

Sedation: This relaxes the horse, reduces stress, and helps lower the head so saliva and food drain out rather than down into the lungs.

Muscle relaxants: Sometimes these are given to ease spasms in the oesophagus.

Gentle oesophageal lavage: A tube is passed through the nose into the oesophagus, and warm sterile water is flushed to break up and wash out the obstruction. This is done very carefully; force must never be used as the oesophagus may rip or tear.

Aftercare

Once the obstruction is cleared, the oesophagus needs time to recover. Your horse may be kept off food for 12–24 hours. When food is reintroduced, it's usually in the form of soft, soaked feeds or mashes. Anti-inflammatories are often prescribed. These help reduce swelling in the oesophagus and make swallowing more comfortable. If there are any concerns about inhalation of food into the lungs, your vet may prescribe antibiotics. Most horses recover well if the choke is treated promptly.

More complicated cases

If the obstruction won't clear, or if damage to the oesophagus is suspected, further steps may be needed:

General anaesthesia and more intensive flushing.

Endoscopic retrieval or breaking up of the blockage.

Rarely, surgery (an oesophagotomy).

In cases of narrowing or scarring, balloon dilation or other procedures may help.

Can it be prevented?

The good news is that many choke cases can be avoided with some simple steps:

Always provide plenty of fresh water.

Soak feeds like cubes, pellets, or beet pulp until they are soft and fully expanded.

Slow down greedy eaters by using trickle feeders, large flat buckets, or placing large smooth stones in feed bowls to stop bolting.

Keep up with dental care. Have your horse's teeth checked at least once a year.

Cut treats into small pieces. Never feed whole apples or carrots.

Never feed a sedated horse until they are fully awake and able to swallow normally.

Feed in a calm environment. Give horses space so they don't rush their food.

Take extra care with horses that have had choke before, as they may always be more at risk.

How much do I need to worry?

Choke can look frightening, but with prompt veterinary care, most horses recover well. The key is recognising the signs early, calling your vet straight away, and then taking steps to prevent it from happening again.

If your horse has had more than one episode of choke, it's particularly important to investigate further, as there may be an underlying problem that needs addressing.

As with many equine conditions, prevention is better than cure, so good feeding practices, dental care, and careful management really do make a difference.