

Horse Health:

Eye Disease

What is it?

Your horse's eyes are vital for their safety, comfort, and performance. Eye diseases can range from mild irritations to serious conditions that threaten vision or even the eye itself. Knowing what to look for and when to act can make all the difference.

Eye disease in horses refers to any condition affecting the **eye or surrounding structures**, including the eyelids, conjunctiva, cornea, lens, and retina. These conditions can be **traumatic, infectious, inflammatory, or neoplastic** (tumour-related). Some are easily treated at home, while others require specialist care.

What causes it?

Eye disease can be caused by:

- **Trauma or injury:** Scratches, abrasions, or penetrating injuries from branches, hay, or other objects.
- **Infection:** Bacterial, viral, or fungal infections can affect the eye surface or deeper structures.
- **Inflammation:** Conditions like **recurrent uveitis** cause painful inflammation inside the eye.
- **Tumours:** Growths such as **squamous cell carcinomas** or **sarcoids** can affect the eyelids or surrounding tissues.
- **Congenital or age - related changes:** Some horses develop cysts or lens opacities over time.

What horses are at risk?

Any horse can develop eye disease, but some are more vulnerable:

- Horses with **light - coloured skin** around the eyes (more prone to sun damage and tumours)
- Horses with a **history of uveitis or trauma**
- **Older horses**, who may develop cataracts or cysts
- Horses kept in **dusty, windy, or fly - prone environments**
- Horses with **limited access to shade or fly protection**

What are the symptoms?

Signs of eye disease can vary depending on the cause, but common symptoms include:

- Squinting or holding the eye closed
- Excessive tearing or discharge (especially if it is discoloured e.g. green)
- Swelling around the eye
- Cloudiness or visible changes in the eye
- Sensitivity to light
- Behavioural changes (e.g. headshaking, reluctance to jump)
- Visible wounds or growths

If your horse shows any of these signs, it's important to contact your vet promptly. Eye conditions can deteriorate quickly and may lead to permanent damage if left untreated.

How is it diagnosed?

Your vet will begin with a thorough examination, which may include:

- Visual inspection of the eye and surrounding tissues
- Fluorescein staining to detect corneal ulcers

- Ophthalmoscopy to examine internal structures
- Ultrasound or imaging for deeper or hidden issues
- Biopsy or cytology if a tumour is suspected

In complex or unclear cases, your vet may recommend **referral to a specialist ophthalmologist** for advanced diagnostics and treatment.

How can it be treated or managed?

Treatment depends on the specific condition:

Traumatic injuries

- Superficial corneal ulcers often heal with topical antibiotics and anti-inflammatories.
- Penetrating injuries or globe - threatening trauma may require surgical repair at a specialist hospital.
- Eyelid lacerations must be treated quickly to preserve eyelid function and prevent corneal damage.

Equine Recurrent Uveitis (ERU or “Moon Blindness”)

- Managed with topical steroids, anti-inflammatories, and pupil - dilating drugs.
- Severe or frequent cases may need surgical intervention or implants to control inflammation.
- In extreme cases, removal of the eye (enucleation) may be necessary to relieve pain.

Tumours or growths

- Early - stage tumours like squamous cell carcinoma may be removed surgically, sometimes with chemotherapy drugs.
- Advanced or inoperable tumours may need radiotherapy, electrochemotherapy, or plesiotherapy, which are usually only

available at specialist centres.

Cysts and Lens Opacities

- Corpora nigra cysts may be treated with laser therapy or aspiration if they cause visual disturbances or behavioural issues.

Can it be prevented?

While not all eye diseases are preventable, you can reduce the risk with good management:

- **Fly masks** and **shade** help protect against trauma and UV damage.
- **Regular checks** for early signs of irritation or injury.
- **Prompt treatment** of any eye issue - don't wait to see if it improves.
- **Clean environments** to reduce dust and debris.
- **Routine vet visits**, especially for older horses or those with a history of eye problems.

If your horse is prone to recurrent issues, your vet may recommend preventive medications or specialist monitoring.

Final Thoughts

Eye disease in horses can be distressing for both horse and owner, but with prompt attention and appropriate care, many conditions can be successfully managed. The key is to **act early** and **follow veterinary advice**.

If you ever feel unsure about your horse's eye health, don't hesitate to contact your vet. They can guide you through the next steps and, if necessary, arrange specialist care to give your horse the best chance of recovery.