**Choke**

Choke is a common condition in horses in which the oesophagus is blocked (the route into the stomach), usually by food material. Although the horse is still able to breathe, as its trachea (windpipe) is unaffected, it is unable to swallow. The signs of choke vary in severity, but can be pretty alarming if you’ve never seen it before. The horse may simply be suddenly disinterested in food, but can also have a range of other signs including:

* Extending the neck and head, with intermittent neck “spasms”
* Coughing, with or without foodstuff being ejected
* Saliva and/or foodstuff coming from the nostrils
* Salivating/drooling from the mouth
* Sometimes a palpable lump is apparent on the left side of the neck where the blockage is bulging
* Some horses are so distressed by the situation that they sweat up and look colicky, and may paw at their bed
* Usually it is the owner who is most distressed!

The main reason horses choke is if they do not chew their food properly. Therefore, horses with dental problems that do not allow them to completely grind their food are particularly at risk. In addition, horses that bolt their feed and do not take the time to chew properly are more likely to suffer from choke. This may simply be due to a greedy horse, or it may be due to competitive pressure from others at feed time. Unchewed large lumps of carrot can also be a culprit, as can very dry, fibrous feed or hay.

A far less common cause of choke is foreign objects. Horses may ingest non-edible materials such as pieces of wood, so crib-biters may be more prone to this type of choke.

In very rare cases the cause of choke can be a neurological problem with the horse’s swallowing mechanism.

Most cases of choke are obvious enough to recognise, occurring during or straight after feeding, and usually pass within a few minutes. It is important to remove all food and water, as even when blocked up some particularly greedy horses will still try to eat, and obviously this will only add to the blockage and make it worse.

Get the horse into a quiet stable where it can be closely monitored and not hassled by other horses, and check the time! It can seem like forever when a horse it distressed, but may actually be only a couple of minutes. Phone the vet – even if it is just for a reassuring chat, we would rather hear from you and find out that the choke has passed uneventfully than miss something that has developed into a colic, or miss something that is not in fact a choke at all.

On the occasions when we do have to go out to a choke, the first line of treatment is sedation, and possibly a smooth muscle relaxant, allowing the neck spasm to relax and the blockage to pass in time. Passing a stomach tube in order to try and manually move the blockage may end up causing much more harm than good, so a conservative approach is preferable in the first instance. We will probably also administer a painkiller/anti-inflammatory to deal with the localised pain and inflammation of the blockage and the coughing, and keep the horse comfortable. If there is excessive fluid being produced and the choke persists for several hours, we may need to give a course of antibiotics to try and prevent an aspiration pneumonia, where the excess fluid ends up going down the trachea to the lungs. This is extremely rare.

In the aftermath of a choke incident the horse will need to be fed very soft food for a few days. Most importantly, his teeth will need to be checked in order to correct any dental problems, or rule them out as a cause. It may simply be that a certain type of feedstuff causes choke in your horse – recognising the pattern and changing feed accordingly should prevent it from happening again. Stopping a greedy horse from bolting his feed is difficult, so softening the feed by wetting it may help, but also try to remove the pressure to eat fast by feeding him away from others. You should always get us to investigate a horse that chokes more than once, especially if you can’t identify an obvious cause.