



## CHOKES

Choke is a relatively common condition that occurs when food or a foreign body blocks the horse's esophagus, which is the tube that takes food from the back of the mouth to the stomach. Choke may be partial or complete.

### ***What causes choke?***

The most common cause of choke is swallowing food or other material, which is either too dry or coarse (most commonly hay), or which swells rapidly once chewed (typically beet pulp or dry hay pellets) so that its passage down the esophagus is slowed or stopped. Choke can occur if a greedy horse attempts to swallow hay, or grain, without chewing it thoroughly or in foals that are given access to dry, coarse hay or straw. Any condition which interferes with the horse's ability to swallow (sedation, trauma to the neck or esophagus, botulism) can predispose him/her to choke.

### ***What are the signs of choke in horses?***

The most obvious signs are discharge of saliva and feed material from the nostrils and/or mouth, depression and apparent difficulty in swallowing. When first choked some horses will panic, make repeated unsuccessful efforts to swallow, or cough and gag as though trying to clear something from the back of the throat. Copious amounts of saliva, often mixed with feed, will pour from the nose and mouth. After an hour or so, the saliva stops and the horse may just look stressed. He will be completely unable to eat or drink. If the condition has gone unnoticed, the horse may become dehydrated and severely depressed. If the esophagus ruptures, death may follow due to shock and infection. Fortunately, this is not common. Although many cases clear on their own, if you think your horse is choked, call your veterinarian immediately, as the sooner treatment is applied, the sooner the condition will resolve making secondary complications less likely.



### ***How is the diagnosis of choke confirmed?***

Your veterinarian will pass a stomach tube via a nostril down into the esophagus to confirm that something is obstructing its passage into the stomach. This examination will also determine at what level the blockage has occurred, how solid it feels and if it can be gently encouraged to pass on into the stomach.

### ***How is choke treated?***

In most cases, saliva continually produced in the mouth lubricates the offending obstruction, eventually allowing its passage to the stomach. Your veterinarian can help speed resolution by administering a sedative and an antispasmodic injection to help relax the muscles of the esophagus. Sometimes, this is all that is required.

In other cases, the horse is sedated and the obstruction is flushed with water via a stomach tube, with the head positioned lower than the stomach. Fluid is gently pumped in via the stomach tube and allowed to run out the nostrils, gradually flushing some of the obstructing material out. This can be a long process and patience is needed to avoid damaging the esophagus. In some panic-stricken, uncooperative or solidly-obstructed cases, it is necessary to anesthetize the horse to allow flushing to be performed safely and thoroughly. Depending on the type of obstruction, some horses may require endoscopic or surgical removal of the blockage. Once the choke is cleared the horse should be fed sloppy feeds or grass for a couple of days to allow any local swelling to subside.



**Food staining both nostrils  
in a choked horse**

### ***What are the possible complications?***

The most important complication is esophageal rupture either as a direct result of the obstruction or following attempts to dislodge it. Another possible complication is aspiration pneumonia. Occasionally while choked, the horse may aspirate fluid and/or food material into the trachea and lungs causing infection, which may be fatal. Some horses with severe choke may also end up with an esophageal stricture – an area of scar tissue that doesn't stretch and wave as well as the rest of the esophagus. This site can be a source for future chokes if not managed properly.

## ***Can I prevent choke?***

The most important management considerations are:

- Soak dried foodstuffs, including hay if necessary, thoroughly to allow them to swell before they are eaten.
- Provide regular dental care to allow the horse to chew food thoroughly and comfortably.
- Provide access to clean water to encourage the horse to drink normally.
- Some horses choke on a particular feed and once this is recognized, access should obviously be avoided.
- For horses that “wolf” down their feed, spread it out in a single layer in a large feed pan so they can’t get a big mouthful. You can also put large rounded rocks in the feed so horses have to eat around them.