

# Equine Esophageal Obstruction (Choke)

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During the last several weeks, I have received several calls from owners stating that their horse was not acting right. After getting a brief history and a physical exam, I told them that their horse was likely choked. I will address symptoms, treatment, consequences and ways to help prevent choke.

There are several signs that may indicate that your horse has an esophageal obstruction (choke). You may notice that your horse is aggressively eating and then stops suddenly and has no interest in feed. As time progresses, the horse will be uncomfortable, extend and writh its head and neck. Eventually, saliva and feed particles will be noticed coming out of the nostrils and sometimes also the mouth. If you see any of these signs, you need to contact your veterinarian immediately. Not every esophageal obstruction can be diagnosed by feeling along the side of your horse's neck. In order to definitively diagnose an obstruction, your veterinarian will pass a naso-gastric tube. If the tube cannot be passed all of the way to the stomach, there is a blockage in the esophagus that needs to be relieved.

Most chokes can be treated with the horse standing and well sedated. However, occasionally general anesthesia is necessary to allow better relaxation to help relieve the obstruction. The esophagus will be filled with water using the naso-gastric tube. Feed particles will begin to be flushed out of the esophagus and come back through the nostrils. As the obstruction is relieved, the tube will be able to be advanced slowly until it eventually reaches the stomach.

Two possible complications after a choke include aspiration pneumonia and esophageal stricture. Nearly every horse that is choked will have saliva and feed particles go down their trachea and into their lungs. These are ideal conditions to initiate bacterial pneumonia. Broad spectrum antibiotics are given, often for several days, following a choke to help decrease the risk of a severe pneumonia from developing. Esophageal stricture occurs as the esophagus heals. Scar tissue forms in the damaged esophagus and causes a narrowing of the esophagus. The stricture can form as early as 30 days after the incident and make them more susceptible to future chokes.

Methods commonly used to help prevent a horse from choking include trying to slow down a fast eater by feeding them smaller meals or by placing large rocks in their feed bucket to make them eat slower. If beet pulp is being fed, make sure that the beet pulp is thoroughly soaked with water. Routine dental examinations and floating when necessary will help ensure that your horse can chew properly.

If you notice any of the typical signs that a choked horse exhibits, contact your veterinarian so that the condition can be treated promptly.

