

Eye Problems are Common for This Time of Year

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Eye maladies seem much more prevalent through the summer and fall. Here we will briefly discuss some of the more common eye conditions recognized in horses. It is important to be aware that any eye problem should be considered serious and addressed in a timely manner. Certain eye conditions can progress quite rapidly (within 24 hours), becoming so bad that the horse will need to have the eye removed.

The first and most common are corneal ulcers. This problem usually involves one eye and is indicated by swelling within the eyelids, increased pain (eg, holding eyelids closed), and tearing or some form of discharge from the eye. The cornea, which is the clear outer layer of the eye, usually has an area which has a white to bluish hue to it. Ulcers begin when the surface of the cornea is damaged and becomes infected. Most corneal ulcers do not threaten the overall health of the eye unless they become infected with certain types of bacteria which produce enzymes that cause further destruction of the cornea. Ulcers are most commonly treated with topical antibiotic ointments placed in the eye 4 to 12 times a day. Since corneal ulcers are fairly common, I believe horse owners who keep emergency supplies should have a general antibiotic eye ointment on hand to treat eye problems when a veterinarian is not readily available. The ointment must be an antibiotic ointment only and contain no steroids such as hydrocortisone or dexamethasone. Steroids can cause further damage if given to horses with corneal damage.

A second condition recognized is eye irritation or conjunctivitis. This presents typically with both eyes involved and includes mild eyelid swelling, tearing, and inflamed, red-looking conjunctiva (white portion of the eye). This can be initiated by dust, pollen and debris in the air and by certain upper respiratory viral infections (colds). It is again usually treated with antibiotic ointments placed in the eye multiple times per day. In some more severe cases that seem to have an allergic component, an antibiotic and steroid combination ointment may be used.

The last condition I will discuss is what is referred to as anterior uveitis. Anterior uveitis is a term which means that the front portion of the eye has inflammation within it. If it becomes a recurrent problem (ie, keeps coming back), then it is referred to as recurrent anterior uveitis which most horse owners recognize as "moon blindness". This presents in many different ways but typically includes eyelid swelling, increased pain, tearing, and a discoloration or white-to-bluish hue over the cornea. It can involve one eye or both. The cause of this disease process is often difficult to determine, and our understanding is somewhat incomplete. Treatment options range dramatically depending on the severity. It is important horses be thoroughly evaluated by a veterinarian.

In closing, horse owners need to be aware that horse's eyes are quite sensitive to different insults, and any abnormality needs to be dealt with in a timely and appropriate manner.

