

Choke in Horses

Horses “choke” when a mass of partially chewed feed becomes lodged in their esophagus. In an effort to dislodge the offending mass, the horse coughs repeatedly and sometimes violently. If left untreated for too long, horses may aspirate fluid or particles into their lungs, causing pneumonia. You will hear all kinds of myths on what causes choking, but in reality a horse can choke on any type of food under the right conditions.

Should you be unfortunate enough to run into the problem, do not panic; horses very rarely die from choke. Call your vet and keep yourself and your horse calm.



CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

Eating too fast (the No. 1 cause of choke)

CAUSES:

Horses eat too fast when they are:

- Food obsessed and get very excited at mealtime.
- In competition with other horses for food (often seen in herd feeding situations).
- Feeling threatened by a stable mate who is aggressive during feeding time.
- Upset because their feeding schedule has been disrupted.

SOLUTIONS:

- Place some large smooth rocks in the feed tub to slow the food-obsessed horse down.
- Feed smaller meals more often.
- Purchase a commercial “slow feeder.”
- Feed a fearful horse alone or out of sight of the other horses.
- If a “bully horse” is in an adjacent stall, change stalls or put up a barrier so the horses can’t see each other at feed time.
- Feed your horse on a regular schedule and try not to be late.
- Allow for lots of turning out, or make hay available 24/7 so the horse doesn’t feel exceedingly hungry.

Not producing enough saliva to adequately wet food before swallowing

CAUSES:

- Health, dental or jaw-related problems may reduce chewing and saliva production.
- Dehydration resulting from hot weather, heavy exercise, shipping, lactation, or restricted access to water can reduce the amount of saliva a horse can produce.

SOLUTIONS:

- Have your horse’s teeth checked annually and address dental and jaw problems as needed.
- If a horse chronically lacks enough saliva, add water to each meal to increase the moisture content.
- Soak hay cubes or beet pulp before feeding them to a horse with a history of insufficient saliva.
- Be sure your horse is properly hydrated before feeding and always provide plenty of fresh water.
- When a horse is dehydrated, offer small amounts of very moist feed over multiple feedings until hydration levels return to normal.

Illness or injury

CAUSES:

- Ill or exhausted horses may lack the ability to chew properly.
- In rare cases, a partial obstruction of the esophagus due to an old injury or tumor can cause a horse to choke.

SOLUTIONS:

- In these cases it is best to work with your veterinarian to determine the best course of action.
- If feed is offered it should be moistened, given frequently, and in very small amounts.