

Equine “Choke” Informational Handout

“Choke” is the general term for obstruction of the esophagus. In horses, this is most often caused by poor dentition that prevents the horse from grinding up its food effectively. The large food particles become stuck in the esophagus and allow more food to pile up behind it. Poor dentition can also cause choke in ruminants, but they are also prone to choke from eating objects. A classic example is a cow that eats a whole apple or corn cob. Animals that are ravenous eaters, extremely hungry, or have neuromuscular disorders that affect the motility of the esophagus are also at risk. The most common places for choke to occur are where the esophagus passes into the thorax, where it passes near the heart, and at the upper sphincter of the stomach. The most common symptoms of choke are excessive drooling, frequent coughing and/or neck stretching, and feed material and saliva coming out the nostrils. Ruminants may also show signs of bloat from the blockage preventing them from releasing gas from the rumen. Dehydration is common. A diagnosis can quickly be made based on a complete history and physical examination. X-rays are sometimes needed to determine the uppermost extent of the blockage.

Choke is a medical emergency and must be treated promptly to minimize the risk of damage to the esophagus that could lead to a perforation or a stricture from scarring during healing. Treatment is focused at either pushing the blockage into the stomach or flushed out using a stomach tube. Sedation is required to keep the animal calm during this process. Once cleared, antibiotics and pain medication are prescribed.

Infection/irritation of the sinuses and nasal passages (sinusitis) is a common sequelae of choke due to bacteria in the obstructing material. Next, the animal is put on a mashed-food diet such as pellets/cube soaked in water to an oatmeal consistency. Pelleted/cubed feed should be soaked no less than 8 hours before feeding, as it takes time for water to fully infiltrate the compressed particles. Hay and dry pellets/cubes should be avoided. Once the animal is stable, any dental abnormalities must be corrected. This is the most important step in managing choke patients and significantly reduces the risk of a relapse. Some animals will need to remain on mashed feed for life. It is important to note that once an animal chokes, they remain at risk for choke for the remainder of their life.