

Horse Choking

Keith P. Poulsen, DVM, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine, provides simple first-aid guidelines for horse owners.

Q. If I suspect that my horse is choking, what first-aid protocol should I follow while waiting for the veterinarian to arrive?

A. Simple choke, or esophageal obstruction, is the most common disorder of the esophagus in horses. Horses can choke on foreign bodies, bedding, or other roughage including coarse grass hay or leafy alfalfa. Common things that lead to choke in horses are prior choke, dental abnormalities and rapid ingestion of feed. The important factor with choke is early recognition and treatment to avoid permanent damage to the esophagus. Horses that choke may have a variety of different clinical signs. Common presentations may include anxiety, standing with an extended neck, retching or gagging, feed material draining out the nose, excessive salivation and coughing. If you suspect that your horse is choking and you have called your veterinarian, the most important first-aid protocol to follow is to attempt to keep your horse calm, avoid exercise, and remove feed and water to avoid aspiration.

Keith Poulsen (DVM) graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine in 2004. He returned to his alma mater in 2005 to pursue a residency in large animal internal medicine.