

# CHOKE

By Rick Wolfe DVM

Choke is a fairly common condition seen in all breeds and classes of horses. It is more specifically termed esophageal choke as the problem is actually in the esophagus as opposed to the trachea or windpipe. The condition is caused by a wad (bolus) of grain, pellets, hay, grass or other materials that becomes lodged in the esophagus as the horse tries to swallow. Obviously this bolus of feed is usually larger than normal, otherwise it would pass into the stomach quite easily. We have on occasion seen choke caused by an apple, plum, pear or other fruit. Thorny plants such as rose stems can also become lodged. Most of the time this condition is caused by a horse taking too big of a bite when eating, frequently following vigorous exercise, and especially when the horse has not had time to “cool out” sufficiently.

Clinically these horses are very uncomfortable, similar to colic in some ways but also quite different. They don't usually roll, get up and down, and look at their stomach. Instead they may seem depressed one moment, then excited the next. The neck area becomes stiff with muscle contractions; this is called WRETCHING. I am convinced that this problem actually scares these horses and they may seem panicky. Most of the time frothy chewed up feed (whatever they ate) is coming out of one or both nostrils. This material is mixed with mucous and or water and the volume may be considerable. Clients frequently report that their horse is drooling “green frothy snot” from its' nose and is acting real “funny.”

The treatment for this condition is usually fairly simple but can be very difficult in some cases. The veterinarian usually tranquilizes the horse to stop some of the muscle contractions in the neck area and allow passage of a stomach tube. If things go well, the stomach tube, when passed through the nose into the esophagus will push the blockage into the stomach and the problem is solved. Many times however this can be somewhat difficult because the blockage is really STUCK. Many experienced equine veterinarians including myself have spent hours trying to relieve some of these choked horses. All I can say is that it can get real messy. In very extreme cases surgery may be necessary, however, post operative complications are a very serious problem. In mild cases the horse can be encouraged to drink water by putting a low flowing water hose in the mouth, swallowing occurs, pushing the obstruction into the stomach.

**IMPORTANT:** After the choke is relieved this horse should not have access to ANYTHING to eat or chew for at least 12 hours because the condition will often re-occur if anything solid is passed into the esophagus during this period. In fact, these horses should now be considered a “choker” and precautions should be taken in the future. We frequently advise owners to place fairly large rocks in the horses feed tub so he or she can't take large bites of grain at one time. The hay may need to be scattered in some cases. These horses should be “cooled out” completely before they are allowed to eat.

Most of these horses recover quite well and with some common sense aftercare and management they do quite well. I recommend that these horses' stalls be identified in a public stable situation whereby they won't be fed incorrectly.