

CORNEAL ULCERS

By Rick Wolfe DVM

This is a fairly common condition affecting the eye of horses. I consider it to be somewhat of an emergency.

A corneal ulcer is usually caused by some type of trauma to the eye such as sand particles in a high wind, thorns or other stiff plant material in the vicinity of lush grazing, etc. In race horses it is usually caused by dirt or mud clods from the horses in front of them in a race. I have seen this condition start from getting hit in the eye by the rider with a small whip, bat or reigns.

Shortly after the injury to the eye, the cornea may and usually does become infected by bacteria, a fungus or both. The infection invades the healthy cornea around the initial injury and can cause severe and sometimes permanent damage causing impaired vision or worse, the actual loss of the eye. Most horsemen have seen a horse with a small white spot on the cornea of one eye. This is most likely the result of a corneal ulcer which has healed leaving a permanent scar. Fortunately, these small scars do not affect a horse's vision a great deal. In other severe cases, the infection invades the entire structure of the eye causing systemic infection throughout the body necessitating the removal of the entire eye.

Clinically, the horse usually has at least some abnormal drainage from the affected eye, the fluid being clear at first. NOTE: There are numerous other conditions that can cause drainage from a horse's eye: including allergies, small cuts or trauma to the eye lid or conjunctiva (the eye tissue around the cornea), a plugged tear duct, etc. With a CORNEAL ULCER however, the eye is almost always partially or totally CLOSED and is moderately to severely painful. By gently yet forcefully opening the eye, the abrasion to the cornea can usually be seen. Frequently the eye is so painful that the horse will not allow anyone to examine the eye without tranquilization. At this point your veterinarian should be contacted.

Your veterinarian will probably sedate this horse and conduct a thorough examination which may include "staining" the cornea if necessary. In our practice we dispense antibiotic ointment or drops to be placed in the eye SEVERAL (5-6) times daily. This frequent dosing is very important as the medication does not stay in the eye very long due to drainage from the eye. We may also dispense atropine eye ointment to be used at night only as it dilates the eye for several hours. In most severe or advanced cases we put the horse on systemic (oral, IV, or IM) antibiotics. There are several additional treatment options depending on the severity of the condition. Your veterinarian will explain these fully. Most veterinarians prescribe daily Banamine or another pain relief medication as a corneal ulcer is quite painful, and the pain actually interferes with the healing process.

Most of these corneal ulcers respond quite well to treatment leaving little or no permanent scarring. The treatment needs to be started EARLY. Putting medication in a horse's eye several times a day can sure be troublesome but this is one time when it is VERY important to achieve a good outcome.