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# CHOKE IN HORSES

As owners and carers it's always nice to see a horse rushing to its feed bucket and finishing every bit of food in sight. Commonly this is seen as the horse really enjoying his food however in some cases the speed at which some horses eat their food could put them at risk for choke (oesophageal obstruction). Choke can be caused by food or even foreign matter.

### Signs of Choke

- extending the neck,
- moving away from the feed bucket
- looking worried or anxious.
- standing with head down and legs spread wider than normal,
- coughing,
- snorting
- may make gagging or unusual noises.
- saliva may drip from the horse's mouth and nostrils. This may appear as a greenish or brownish discharge, often containing particles of substance.

### Why does choke happen?

The most common cause of choke is swallowing too much too quickly or "bolting" as its often called. The other cause is swallowing anything that has not been thoroughly chewed and moistened with saliva, which can occur more often in older/younger horses that perhaps don't have good/correct dentition.

### Can avoiding certain types of feed help?

The answer to this is No.

If this was the case then certain types of feed could simply be avoided. However, the fact is that almost ANYTHING the horse swallows—grains, complete feeds, small pellets, big pellets, chunks of apples or carrots—can all potentially cause choke if the material is consumed in large amounts or is too dry to pass easily along the oesophagus.

It was once thought that pelleted feeds were the most frequent cause, but research has not found this to be true and many yards have used such products for years with no issues. Fibrous hay or tough plants encountered while grazing may also lead to choke. In addition, some horses can pick up rocks, sticks, or other objects in the pasture, whether intending to eat them or just play with them, and these objects may become lodged in the oesophagus if the horse swallows them.



Credit: ©Steve Bardens via Horse and Hound.co.za

## Is choke a serious problem?

Horses, unlike humans, can't breathe through their mouths and thus a blockage would only inhibit further swallowing, rather than putting them in danger of suffocation, however the situation can still become serious if the obstruction is not removed.

"The most serious complication occurs when saliva backs up behind the obstruction and then is pushed into the trachea, or windpipe. Normally, the horse's head-down eating position keeps this from occurring, but when the oesophagus is blocked, saliva and food particles may be forced past the epiglottis, (a flap of cartilage that keeps swallowed food and water out of the trachea). In a horse with choke, some of the saliva drains harmlessly from the nostrils, but saliva and grain particles may also be drawn into the lungs, and pneumonia is the common result" (KER 2008)

Dehydration is another common issue when obstructions occur as more saliva than normal will be lost and if the horse is unable to drink then this further increases the risk of dehydration. Esophageal tissues at the blockage site may also begin to swell and can become so irritated that they ulcerate. Scar tissue from this type of injury greatly increases the chance that the horse will choke again and prevent horses from being able to consume the correct diet in order to stay happy and healthy.

## What should be done in a choke case?

A choking horse should not be allowed to eat or drink anything further and should be kept as calm as possible until the obstruction can be cleared.

"Some chokes resolve without treatment, but in many cases a vet must administer sedatives or muscle relaxants to loosen contractions of the oesophagus. Water or other lubricants may be given by nasogastric tube to flush the material out of place. If this procedure is done incorrectly, it can complicate the problem, so this is not a "home remedy" option. Surgery is usually not necessary but may be performed as a treatment of last resort. When the obstruction is cleared, the veterinarian will decide whether to administer antibiotics to prevent infection of the throat or lungs" (KER, 2008).

After initial treatment feed and hay maybe restricted for the first 24 hours. This allows the throat some time to rest and heal. Hay and feed would then be gradually introduced back by first offering only soaked hay or even chopped hay such as chaff, and the wettest mashes of the horses normal feed.

## What preventative measures can be taken?

Prevention will largely depend on the reason for choke. If it was due to poor quality, tough hay or plants within the horses' paddock then

alternative sources of roughage will need to be sourced or the horse moved from the offending paddock. Also, if it was a foreign object then it's possible the choking episode would be a once off, if managed correctly.

If the horse is known to "bolt" food, then management changes can be made as a first port of call and generally these will centre around slowing the horse down while eating. This can be done by putting several large, smooth rocks in the feed bucket too keep the horse from being able to pick up too much food in one mouthful, or by putting the food into a feed ball, that drops feed out in small amounts when the horse moves the ball around.

The only issue with such measures is that it doesn't stop the problem at the source and it should be investigated as to why the horse is swallowing large quantities of dry material? And how can the situation be altered so that the horse ingests small mouthfuls of well chewed and moistened food?

## **There could be several issues causing "bolting" of food, such as:**

- being fed in a group. The horse may feel food must be eaten quickly to avoid competition, and so keeping the horse alone at feeding time may help
- ensuring the horse has not had food restricted for any length of time
- providing some hay before meal times can ensure the horse is not anxiously awaiting the next meal and is fuller before starting to eat
- feeding lots of small meals
- competition for water in the paddock
- poor water quality ie buckets not be clean and so horses becomes reluctant to drink

Another thing to consider is the horses' teeth. If the horse is uncomfortable then they may chew less and will therefore produce inadequate saliva (horses can only produce saliva when they chew) to moisten the food. Teeth should be checked once or twice a year. If the choke episode occurred after prolonged exercise, or during early lactation, it could be due to Low saliva production and dry throat membranes related to dehydration so always monitor the horses water intake and hydration levels. Also pay special attention to Horses that are ill as they may simply not have the energy to chew their food and wet feeds can help reduce the risk of choke.

Owners whos horses have choked in the past can implement a few additional changes such as adding soaked beet pulp to their feed, soaking cubes and even soaking meal type feeds, as well as soaking hay before feeding, as these measures all add water to the diet which can greatly help with lubrication during eating.



### Conclusion

Anything the horse consumes can cause choke and therefore it can be hard to avoid. However making small management changes such as providing frequent, small meals of moistened food and hay can go along way to helping prevent choke.

### References:

*Kentucky Equine Research, 2008. KER research staff:*  
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 Contributors: Deidre M. Carson, BVSc, MRCVS & Sidney W. Ricketts, LVO, BSc, BVSc, DESM, DipECEIM, FRCPath, FRCVS. <https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/choke-in-horses>  
 Photo taken from:  
<https://www.horseandhound.co.uk/horse-care/vet-advice/choke-in-horses-41184>

# TESTIMONIALS

*Thank you Epol for a wonderful food.*

My mare Ready for Roses has never looked as good as she does now. She is always ready to get going in the arena while remaining level headed and focused. Her condition remains good and that is all thanks to the Epol Rider Cubes.

Thank you

**SOPHIE HACKLAND**



SOPHIE HACKLAND

*In October 2019 we had three Arabian horses arrive at Kagera Sugar Ltd, Tanzania from Oman.*

They arrived looking amazing, but we needed to transition them from a French made feed to a more local one. With help and guidance from the team at Equus we gently introduced All Time Balancer and Cool n Perform 12% over a number of weeks. We have not only managed to maintain their condition during this time of growth and complete change in their environment but have kept them looking beautiful. Their coats are shinier than ever while their temperament and energy levels have not changed at all. The transition was smooth, and the feed seemed to supplement our growing colt and filly so well! Thank you Equus for such a great product, the results speak for themselves.

**COLLEEN DAVIS**

**KAGERA SUGAR LTD**



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For an absolutely free consultation with no further obligation contact our professional consultants to schedule a visit to your yard.

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