

EQUINE RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS

Horses are active, athletic animals and need to efficiently and effectively breathe large quantities of air to perform to their full potential. This requires that the respiratory system be as healthy as possible.

It has been estimated that respiratory problems are second only to lameness as a cause of poor performance in horses. As awareness increases, respiratory disease may eventually be found to exceed orthopedic problems. Surveys have shown that over 25% of all equine calls made by veterinarians are related to some kind of respiratory condition.

Problems with respiration are particularly significant, because many respiratory problems go unnoticed, particularly in the early stages. Respiratory conditions are not always as obvious as orthopedic problems, making it less likely that horse owners will look for them initially as a potential source of performance problems. Perhaps the biggest reason for this lack of awareness is the perception that the term “respiratory disease” means an obviously sick horse because of noticeable symptoms like fever, depression, and going off feed. This is not always the case.

Breathing (respiratory) problems will prevent your horse from performing at its best. Even if your horse is not visibly ill, it can be experiencing non-infectious respiratory disease that can limit performance. Untreated, these problems may develop into more serious chronic problems that can be difficult to treat and may cause permanent changes to the horse’s airways. The problems may become serious enough to stop you from riding, showing, competing, or racing your horse.

Horses can suffer distress and damage as a result of respiratory infections caused by bacteria and viruses. Fungal infections can be serious, but are seen less frequently than problems caused by other infectious agents. Certain internal parasites (ascarids and lungworms) can also have negative effects on the respiratory system, however, this risk can be minimized with an aggressive and effective deworming program. Symptoms of infectious respiratory disease include coughing, nasal discharge, fever, labored breathing, depression, and loss of appetite.

Most performance horses are affected by breathing problems that have nothing to do with an active infection. Heaves, which is often referred to as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), but might be more accurately described as “equine asthma,” is a chronic and fairly obvious non-infectious respiratory disease of older horses (most are 7 years of age or older). The incidence is significant, as up to 12% of older horses are thought to be affected to some degree. Inflammatory airway disease (IAD) is a non-infectious respiratory disease that is different than heaves. IAD is thought to be associated with continuous exposure to high levels of inhaled particles and other irritants associated with feed, bedding, dusty arenas, and environmental sources.

Many owners question how they can know if their horse is suffering from a breathing problem or respiratory disease. Whenever possible spend a few minutes observing your horse and ask yourself these questions:

- Does your horse cough or clear its throat, but otherwise does not appear to be ill?
- Do you suspect your horse may not be performing to the best of its ability?
- Does your horse seem to take longer than normal to recover from a performance or event?

- Do the nostrils flare at rest?
- Is there mild to moderate nasal discharge from the nose but does not otherwise appear to be ill?
- As you exercise your horse does it pant or wheeze?
- Do you stable or trailer your horse frequently?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes you should suspect that your horse may have a respiratory condition and contact your veterinarian. If your veterinarian discovers a respiratory condition, he or she will prescribe medications specifically developed for your horse. Bronchodilators, i.e. Ventipulmin, open the airways by reversing bronchospams, thinning mucus, and facilitating its removal. Your veterinarian may also use anti-inflammatory drugs and antibiotics, and recommend specific stable management strategies to minimize the risk of future respiratory problems.

This article is an excerpt taken from Owner's Guide to Respiratory Problems In The Horse, Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica BI 2003-3 10/03 by John Spunaugle RPh, Valley Vet Supply/Direct Pet Superstore.