



## **Choke Fact Sheet**

### ***What is Choke?***

The term “choke” actually refers to an obstruction of the oesophagus, as opposed to an obstruction of the trachea when a human chokes.

### ***So what does Choke look like?***

The first thing you will notice in a horse that has an oesophageal obstruction is a green, often frothy, discharge coming from the nostrils. The discharge usually contains food material and is caused by the build up of saliva and ingested food in front of whatever is causing the obstruction in the oesophagus.

Horses that are “choking” often hold their head outstretched, look anxious and may cough. They often appear to be trying to swallow and sometimes you can even see a bulge in the left side of their neck where the obstruction is.



### ***What should I do if I think my horse has Choke?***

- Don't panic! Many cases of choke do resolve spontaneously
- Call your vet if the choke lasts more than 30 minutes
- Keep your horse calm and try to reassure them as they are often anxious
- Remove all food to prevent your horse from eating and worsening the obstruction

### ***How is Choke treated?***

Your vet will usually sedate your horse first of all to reduce anxiety and to lower the head to reduce inhalation of food and saliva. An anti-spasmodic drug is often used to help relax the oesophagus and increase the likelihood of the obstruction passing down into the stomach. A nasogastric tube is often passed up through your horse's nose and

down into the oesophagus to identify how far down the obstruction is. Your vet may try to flush the obstructed food material out by repeated administration of water into the tube or, once the obstruction is softened, be able to dislodge the food down into the stomach.

The vast majority of choke episodes in the horse resolve to simple treatment on farm, but sometimes further investigation and treatment may be required at a referral hospital, particularly if episodes recur frequently. Often an endoscope is required to visualise what is causing the obstruction and assess oesophageal damage.

### ***What causes Choke?***

Improperly sugar beet pulp is a common cause of choke and can be prevented by soaking in 1 part beet pulp to 4 parts water for 24h before feeding. *Speedi-beet* is a very handy product that is flaked and only requires 10 minutes of soaking. Another common reason for a choke to occur in older horses is from swallowing poorly chewed food due to bad teeth - another reason to ensure your horse's teeth are regularly seen by your veterinarian. Greedy horses eating their carrots and apples too quickly can choke as well as horses that have accidentally swallowed some sort of foreign body like a potato.

### ***Complications associated with Choke***

The main complication associated with choke is aspiration pneumonia. This occurs when saliva and food material that has tracked back up the oesophagus due to the obstruction gets accidentally inhaled down the trachea and into the lungs. Even small amounts of food and saliva down in the lungs can create an infection and develop into a severe pneumonia. If your vet suspects pneumonia, your horse will be given antibiotics. The other common complication of choke is the formation of an oesophageal stricture. A stricture is essentially a narrowing of the oesophagus due to scar tissue formation after the oesophagus has been traumatised due to the obstruction. These can be difficult to treat and can cause repeated episodes of choke.