

Acute Eye Pain

Horses have large, prominent eyes positioned so they can almost see 360 degrees around them. Ideal for 'flight' animals.

While that's the perfect design to help keep them safe from predators, it does have its flaws. Injuries are relatively common in horses and ponies because of their inquisitive nature, their tendency to panic and arguments with stables, doors and pasture-mates. Their eyes are fragile and prone to injury and disease which can, if left unattended, destroy their vision. Eye injuries should always be treated as a true emergency.

What To Look Out For?

Every time you visit your horse look out for:

- Obvious cuts, grazes and abrasions
- A watery eye
- A partially closed or fully closed eye
- Discharge
- An inflamed, red eye
- Eyelashes pointing lower than normal
- Sensitivity to light
- Excessive blinking or squinting
- A change to the colour of the cornea
- Swelling around the eye
- Rubbing of the eye on the inside of the knee or on other objects
- One eye being a different size

Most issues will generally only be present in one eye.

If your horse seems to have any of these signs, it is imperative you speak to your vet straight away.

Minor injuries and infections can soon turn into something much more serious if left to 'heal by themselves' and not treated correctly.



Common Causes of Eye Pain

It could be something as simple as some dust in the eye that has caused a bit of irritation – you know how painful it is when you get something in your eye? It could, however, be something a bit more sinister. Your vet will be able to diagnose the issue after examining your horse and advise you what the best course of action is.

The most common problems causing eye pain are:

- Trauma (to the eyelids, skin, bony sockets or to the eye itself)
- Foreign bodies
- Corneal ulcer
- Inflammation or infection of the globe (uveitis)
- Inflammation or infection of the cornea (keratitis)
- Glaucoma (increased pressure inside the eye)



As soon as you realise there is an eye issue, move your horse to a dark stable or barn to help with sensitivity to light, help keep them calm and give us a call.

Examination of the Eye

Your vet will need to examine your horse somewhere dark, using specialised ophthalmic equipment.

You'll need to restrain your horse properly so it can't do any further damage, while you wait for the vet and while your horse is being examined. Sometimes sedation or anaesthetic may be needed for a thorough examination of a painful eye. The vet may use special drops to dilate the pupil or dyes as part of the examination.

What Are The Treatments?

The most common issues like conjunctivitis and corneal ulcers can be treated with prescribed eye drops or creams. Don't be tempted to use any leftover medication you may have from a previous vet visit for an eye problem – you may end up causing more damage and discomfort for your horse.

Wounds etc. will need stitching by your vet. Aftercare appointments are incredibly important to make sure any wounds or issues heal properly and don't develop into something worse.

Easy to find foreign bodies may just need flushing out. The vet will do this and then check that no damage has been caused by the foreign object.

More complex cases may need hospitalisation or, in rare cases, surgery.

Some horses are really good at having eye treatments administered but, if the eye is really sore, your horse might find it all a bit too painful and stressful. In these cases, the vet will place a special tube under the eyelid to help administer the medication. The tube will be removed when the course of treatment is finished.



Reducing the Risks

You'll never be able to guarantee no injuries to your horse's eyes but you can reduce the risk.

At least once per season, check the areas that your horse frequents. Think about potential hazards in the stable and field. Look out for broken items, hooks, nails etc. Check your trailer for the same hazards.

Check fencing and any trees in the field for anything that could potentially cause injury.

If your horse likes to think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, give him something special in his field to graze on that is better. Use something safe to fill in the gaps between the fence struts – electrical tape or rope works well.

Keep an eye on weeds in the field, especially spiky ones. Make sure any prickly bushes are kept under control.

Protect your horse from insects with specialised insect repellent and a fly mask. (The fly mask has the added benefit of restricting some UV rays too.) Make sure you clear the field of manure and muck out regularly to help keep the flies down.

