

The Coughing Horse

Coughing is often the first sign most commonly recognised by owners in horses with respiratory disease. Respiratory diseases are some of the most commonly encountered diseases in horses and can result in poor performance and time off work. Therefore recognising an abnormal cough in your horse and investigation to treat and prevent respiratory disease is important.

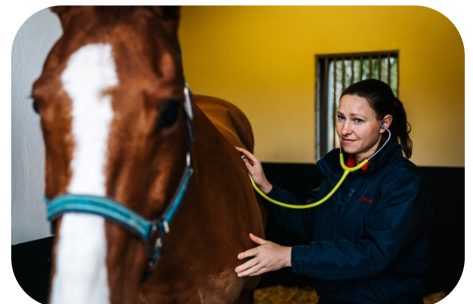


What information is useful to the vet?

- Investigation of a cough should begin with taking a thorough history.
- How long has your horse been coughing?
- Is your horse unwell with a cough?
- What type of cough does your horse have? (wet, dry, productive, non-productive)
- When does your horse cough? (When stabled, during exercise, specific time of year)
- Does your horse have concurrent breathing problems? (when stabled or when exercised)

What will your vet do?

Initially a thorough clinical exam of your horse including listening to the lung fields and upper respiratory tract is usually performed. The vet is likely to check if your horse has a temperature, examine the nostrils to check for nasal discharge and may attempt to elicit a cough by gently pinching the trachea. In some cases a clinical exam may be enough to diagnose a condition or give a strong clinical indication, which warrants treatment. Other cases may require further investigation to complete a diagnosis and provide a treatment plan.



Further investigations can include taking a blood sample to check for signs of systemic infection or inflammation. An endoscope (small camera) can be passed up the nostril and down into the lungs to visualise any problems in the airways. Endoscopy can also enable the vet to perform a tracheal wash or broncho-alveolar lavage. These samples can be analysed to look for abnormal cell types or bacteria present in the lower portion of the respiratory tract.

Coughing emergencies

The most common cause of a coughing emergency is choke. Choke is caused by food material becoming stuck in the oesophagus and although doesn't strictly affect the horses respiratory system can cause the horse to cough quite violently. Choke will commonly occur during or immediately after the horse has been eating. The horse will appear to cough violently, food material may be seen coming from the nostrils of the horse and in severe cases the horse may appear extremely distressed or display colic signs. This is an emergency and contacting your vet immediately is advised.



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Common causes of coughing

Common infectious causes of coughing include equine influenza and strangles. Both of these diseases are highly contagious and can spread very quickly within a group of horses if both vet and owner do not undertake appropriate management of cases. Equine herpes virus, bacterial lower respiratory tract infection or inflammation of the pharynx and/or larynx can also present as a horse with a cough.

Allergic airway disease (Recurrent Airway Obstruction RAO) is also extremely common in the general horse population. There can be several different triggers that all cause similar symptoms not dissimilar to some types of asthma in people. Triggers can include a dusty environment or pasture pollens.

Lungworm can also cause coughing symptoms but is unusual in horses with a good worming history. Donkeys can interestingly have lungworm but be asymptomatic.

Horses working at a high level may suffer from exercise induced pulmonary haemorrhage, which is caused by bleeding from the microvasculature of the lungs when intense exercise is undertaken. This is commonly seen in racehorses.

Treatment

Depending on the cause of the cough, treatment can include antibiotics, non-steroidal anti inflammatories, anthelmintics (wormers), steroids and bronchodilators. In some cases inhaled drugs given via the nostril with an inhaler are appropriate as they deliver drug to the exact site affected.

Management changes for horses suffering from allergic airway disease can constitute a large part of treatment. Avoiding exposure to trigger factors by reducing dust or pollens in the horses' environment is extremely important. Changing stable and turn out management, using dust free bedding and soaking hay or giving haylage often results in resolution of clinical signs.

Whatever the cause of your horse's respiratory disease, reducing the dust in your horse's environment will be beneficial.

Prevention

Some respiratory diseases are commonly vaccinated against E.g. Equine Influenza. Keeping vaccinations up to date is important in reducing spread of disease and severity of symptoms. As discussed in treatment of disease management changes to reduce dust in your horse's environment is generally beneficial in all cases but especially important in horses with allergic airway disease.

For all infectious respiratory disease good hygiene and biosecurity measures are imperative to limit spread from infectious animals.

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