

Equine Asthma (EA)

In its early stages, Equine Asthma (previously known as Heaves/COPD/RAO) is a reversible constriction of the small airways (bronchioles and alveoli), caused by an allergic reaction to, most commonly, dust or pollen.

This allergic reaction causes fluid production and thickening of the walls in these small airways, leading to their obstruction. This results in your horse having to breathe harder and faster. They also often develop a cough to try and clear mucus.

Unfortunately, there is no cure, but there are treatments and management changes that can help. It is a progressive condition and, if left untreated, it can lead to scarring within the lungs and irreversible damage.

What are the symptoms?

- Coughing
- Nasal discharge
- Increased respiratory rate and effort
- Difficulty exercising
- Development of a 'heave line' (A line of visible abdominal muscles, caused by coughing)
- Respiratory distress (acute attack if repeated exposure to allergen)



How do we diagnose EA?

Initially, your vet will take a full history from you and then perform a thorough, physical examination of your horse.

The next step is to perform an endoscopy, where a camera on the end of a flexible cable is inserted up the horse's nose and down into their airways. Samples are then taken from the trachea (wind pipe) and bronchioles (deep within the lungs) to distinguish between EA and other respiratory disorders.

The results of these tests will help your vet decide on the correct treatment. For example, the treatment of EA could be very dangerous to a horse that is suffering from a chronic infection and not EA.

However, your horse could have an infection as well as EA and the test results will tell your vet which is the best antibiotic is to treat your horse with.

Treatment

Some cases, if caught early enough, will respond to management changes alone. This includes, for example, keeping the horse on a 'dust-free' management system such as avoiding the allergen that causes the reaction – changing bedding to shavings or paper, soaking or steaming hay or haylage, dampening hard feed and, if stabled, having excellent ventilation.

In more severe or chronic cases, medical treatment may also be necessary.

In an acute flare up the horse may suffer a severe bout of respiratory distress and steroids will be given by intravenous injection to try to reduce the inflammation as quickly as possible. They may also be given a drug called atropine, which relaxes smooth muscle.

In chronic cases, treatment with steroid powders or inhalers is often needed, alongside an airway dilator. The dilator can help, in the short term, to open the airway slightly and improve breathing, but it does not treat the underlying inflammatory cause of the disease which the steroids do.



It is important to remember that drugs on their own, without making sure you implement good management, will not control equine asthma.



On going environmental management is key in all cases of Equine Asthma. Drug treatment alone will not control this disease. Only a combined treatment and management plan will be effective.

Give your vet a call to discuss treatments and help you decide on the best management plan for your horse.

If you are worried about Equine Asthma and would like to speak to someone about what the options are, give us a call on 01637 880307.