



Equine Asthma - Fact Sheet

Another name for RAO, COPD, heaves, broken wind!

Equine Asthma has, over the years, had many names including RAO, COPD, heaves and broken wind. Equine Asthma has recently been suggested as a name for this condition due to the current thinking that it is more similar to human asthma than once thought! This condition is commonly diagnosed in the horse and symptoms range from exercise intolerance through to coughing, wheezing and severe respiratory distress.

Why does it occur?

Equine Asthma occurs when susceptible horses are exposed to specific airborne allergens. The allergens are commonly found in the stable environment and include dust, mould spores, bacterial toxins, pollens and ammonia. These then cause the airways to become inflamed and constrict and produce mucus, which causes the clinical signs such as coughing and wheezing. The normal respiratory rate for a horse at rest is 8-14 breaths per minute. This will be increased in cases of equine asthma, and in more severe cases nostril flare and a rapid respiratory rate may indicate difficulty breathing. If you watch the flanks there will be extra abdominal effort when breathing. When the condition becomes chronic a heave line will develop due to the extra muscular effort required when breathing.

Who is most susceptible?

Equine Asthma can affect horses of all ages but is more common in middle aged horses. This condition is commonly seen in winter when horses tend to be stabled more. A variation of this condition is called Summer Pasture Associated Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (SPAOD) which, as the name suggests, is due to sensitivity to pollens found in the summer.

How do we know for sure that it is asthma?

To diagnose Equine Asthma your Vet will examine your horse with a particular focus on listening to the airways. Further diagnostic tests may be required. Commonly endoscopy is performed to visualise the upper airways and to allow us to collect samples from the airways. Samples can be collected from the trachea (tracheal wash) or deeper in the airways (bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL)). These samples will confirm the diagnosis and help guide the treatment plan.

How do we manage confirmed cases?

Management of Equine Asthma should be based on a case by case basis as guided by your Vet. Your Vet may prescribe medications to relieve symptoms and treat the underlying inflammation. Unfortunately Equine Asthma is a life long condition so will require long term environmental management. The aim is a 'dust free' environment. This is often achieved by maximising turnout for as long as possible, ideally 24/7. When turned out be aware of hay fed in fields and bedding in field shelters as these can be enough to trigger the condition. When stabled, bedding should be as dust free as possible. Paper, rubber matting and dust extracted shavings can all be good options. Straw is not recommended. Your horse should be turned out when mucking out. Build-up of urine in the bed should also be avoided.

Dry hay should not be fed to horses with Equine Asthma, but commercially dust extracted haylage, soaked or steamed hay are better options. Unlike soaking hay for good doers, 30 minutes should be sufficient to reduce the dust particles. Commercial steamers are preferable to DIY steamers, as DIY steamers can encourage bacterial growth on the hay and may end up being counterproductive. Forage should be fed from the floor to reduce the dust and debris in the airspace.

The position of the stable should be considered. Although this cannot always be changed there are things you can do to improve the air quality for your horse. Consider which stable your horse is in, aiming for the stable with the best ventilation and well away from the hay/ straw storage and muck pile. Opening windows and roof ventilation will help. Don't forget your horse's neighbours too; if they share an air space then the neighbour's choice of bedding will impact on your horse! Keep your stable clean and disinfect regularly to reduce mould and bacterial build up. Encouraging all the stables in the same airspace to have better air hygiene will ultimately be beneficial to all the horses in that environment, not just those with Equine Asthma.

If you are concerned about your horse please contact us for further advice.