

Heaves

Heaves, or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), is a respiratory problem of horses that we, as owners, have created by the environment we have chosen to keep our horses in.

It begins with allergies to a variety of substances



such as feed dusts, hay molds, and plant spores. These irritants cause small airways in the lungs to thicken and swell. This constriction allows air into the air sacs (alveoli) but restricts the outflow of air and mucous. As the horse forces to exhale the trapped air, many alveoli can rupture and cause emphysema.

This gradual process also explains the slow progression of clinical signs. Typically, one will notice flared nostrils, forced expiration (heave lines on body wall), a chronic non-productive cough, and a gradual decrease in

exercise tolerance.

COPD horses have difficulty trying to breathe especially in warm and humid weather and when particular allergens are abundant. Respiratory viruses (Rhino or Influenza) often cause irritations that make minor cases drastically worse.

A diagnosis of heaves can be done with a complete physical exam by a veterinarian and some basic respiratory response tests.

Treatment early in the disease process is very important prior to extensive lung damage. The treatment of heaves consists of bronchodilators, anti-inflammatories, and/or case specific allergy medication. Allergy testing and specific vaccine use offer the best long-term solution and is cost effective in the long term.

Conscientious use of respiratory vaccines (i.e. Rhino-Flu) also reduce the incidence of heaves.

Environmental management particularly during the winter months is of the utmost importance. Feedstuffs must be as mold-free and dust-free as possible.

Pelleted feeds are not as dusty as whole grains. Round bales of hay are not recommended because horses "burrow" into the round bales and eat the "less weathered" hay. This creates pockets of dust and mold around their face.

Ground feeding of hay is better than box or mounted feeders. Also, a clean, cool, dry, and dust-free environment is a must!!