

Equine Asthma

What is Equine Asthma?

Equine Asthma has many previous names including COPD and Heaves. Equine Asthma is a common respiratory disease caused by hypersensitivity in the lungs to airborne dusts, molds, and other allergens, leading to long-term inflammation.

Asthma can affect horses, mules, and donkeys of any breed or age with a wide range of severity and clinical signs. Mild asthma (Inflammatory Airway Disease) typically affects younger to middle-aged horses and may only present as decreased performance. Sometimes they will cough and have mild nasal discharge at the start of exercise or while eating. Mild asthma flares may occur during different times of the year (seasonal or sporadic) and during times of poor air quality (smoke, barn conditions). Younger horses are more prone to flares after a viral infection.

Horses with moderate to severe asthma (Recurrent Airway Obstruction) often have more frequent coughing, exercise intolerance, increase breathing effort (even at rest) in addition to occasional nasal discharge.

Most horses with asthma are reacting to allergens within the environment of their stall or barn, but sometimes we see horses that are reacting to pollens and dusts that they encounter outdoors. This type is called Equine Pasture Asthma (EPA). These horses can have very similar clinical signs to other asthmatic horses such as a snotty nose or cough, typically during hot and humid summer months.

While asthma is a progressive disease and cannot be cured, it can be effectively managed in many horses with a combination of environmental management changes and medications. Treating flare-ups quickly and effectively will help decrease the amount of irreversible damage to the airways.

Diagnosis & Testing

For moderate to severely affected horses, we can often presumptively diagnose Equine Asthma based off of the history, environment, and physical exam findings. Since we cannot ask your horse to take deeper breaths, we will sometimes loosely place a bag over the nose for a couple minutes while listening to the lungs if abnormal sounds are not heard during our regular exam.

It is important to ensure your horse's respiratory signs are not from an infectious disease so that we choose appropriate treatments. This may include general bloodwork, testing for specific infectious diseases, endoscopy, ultrasound, or culture of fluid from the airways.

To definitively diagnosis and stage asthma, we perform a bronchoalveolar lavage. For this test, a small tube is passed through the nose into the lower airways. Sterile saline is flushed through the tube and aspirated back. The fluid is examined under a microscope to see the proportions of cell types that are being shed in the airways. Endoscopy of the airways can also support an asthma diagnosis if excess mucous is seen in the trachea and the lower airways appear inflamed.