

# Esophageal Obstruction (aka Choke)



## What Is Esophageal Obstruction?

Esophageal obstruction, commonly referred to as “choke,” happens when food or another material becomes lodged in the horse’s esophagus, partially or completely blocking passage to the stomach. Most commonly, it occurs because the horse has rapidly consumed feed without chewing it properly. While often not immediately life-threatening, choke can cause the horse distress and requires prompt attention to avoid complications such as aspiration pneumonia if the horse inhales food material into the lungs.



## Clinical Signs

The signs of choke in horses are usually quite dramatic and easy to recognize. These include:

- Repeated coughing or gagging.
- Drooling or excessive salivation.
- Discharge of feed material or saliva from the nose.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Anxiety or restlessness.
- Neck stretching or abnormal neck posture.
- Swelling along the neck (in severe cases).
- Decreased appetite or refusal to eat.

If choke persists, the horse can become dehydrated.



## Diagnosis

To confirm an esophageal obstruction, the veterinarian will observe the horse’s behavior and signs and palpate the neck to feel for a lump along the esophagus. He or she might sedate the horse and pass a nasogastric tube (a long tube inserted through the nostril into the esophagus) to identify the location of the obstruction. With complicated cases, the veterinarian might also use endoscopy, radiographs, or ultrasound to visualize the blockage and determine its severity.



## Treatment and Management

Treatment focuses on removing the obstruction safely while minimizing stress and preventing complications. Common management steps include:

- Withholding food while waiting for the veterinarian to arrive.
- Sedation to relax the esophageal muscles and reduce distress.
- Nasogastric intubation with gentle flushing (lavage) using warm water to break down and remove the obstruction.
- Endoscopy if needed, especially for stubborn or non-feed-related obstructions.
- Antibiotics and anti-inflammatories to treat or prevent aspiration pneumonia and reduce inflammation.

- Intravenous fluids to correct dehydration, if needed.

Never attempt to force food, water, or tubing without veterinary guidance—this can cause more harm than good.

After resolution, your veterinarian might recommend providing the horse with a wet or soupy feed for a few days before gradually reintroducing the normal feed. Horses that choke repeatedly might need dietary and management changes, such as using slow feeders, soaking feed, and avoiding large treats.



## When to Call Your Vet

Call the veterinarian immediately if your horse shows any signs of choke. Also seek veterinary attention if:

- Your horse has dental issues or is having difficulty chewing (as evidenced by quidding, or dropping partially chewed clumps of hay or feed when eating).
- Your horse has a tendency to “bolt” his feed, or eat it very quickly without chewing properly.
- Your horse shows signs of distress, pain, or colic.
- Your horse chokes but it resolves on its own—the veterinarian should still examine him to check for injury to the esophagus or the early stages of pneumonia.
- Choke recurs.