



What Is Equine Asthma?

Equine asthma syndrome is a chronic inflammatory respiratory condition characterized by airway inflammation, bronchospasm (narrowing of the airways), and increased mucous production in the lungs. It exists on a spectrum of severity:

- Mild to moderate asthma causes subtle signs and minimal breathing difficulty at rest in horses of all ages.
- Severe equine asthma typically affects middle-aged to older horses with more pronounced clinical signs and breathing difficulty.

Equine asthma is primarily triggered by inhaled allergens and irritants, with the most common culprits being dust, mold spores, pollen, ammonia, endotoxins, and other airborne particles.



Clinical Signs

The clinical signs of equine asthma vary depending on the severity of the condition. Horses with mild to moderate asthma might show signs of:

- Intermittent or mild cough, especially at the beginning of exercise.
- Decreased performance.
- Prolonged recovery after exercise.
- Occasional nasal discharge.

They otherwise breathe normally at rest. Signs of severe equine asthma include:

- Persistent, chronic cough.
- Increased respiratory rate and effort at rest.
- Nasal discharge.
- Flared nostrils when breathing.
- Development of a “heave line” along

the abdomen.

- Pronounced abdominal effort when breathing.
- Exercise intolerance.
- Weight loss despite normal appetite.

Signs are often worse in specific environments (e.g., stables) or seasons and might improve when horses are turned out to pasture.



Diagnosis

Diagnosing equine asthma involves a clinical exam and testing. Your veterinarian will assess your horse's respiratory effort, cough, and breathing patterns at rest and while exercising. He or she will also ask for a history of the horse's management, environment, and symptoms. Diagnostic tests include:

- Endoscopy to examine the upper airways and collect mucous samples.
- Bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL) to collect fluid samples from the lungs and assess inflammatory cells.
- Lung function testing to measure lung capacity and airflow.
- Thoracic ultrasound.
- Blood tests.
- In severe cases, chest X-rays.

Your veterinarian will likely use a combination of these tests to determine the severity of asthma and to rule out other conditions such as bacterial pneumonia or viral respiratory infections.



Treatment and Management

Some horses with asthma require lifelong medication, while others can be managed with environmental controls.

Most rely on a combination of the two. Dust control is the cornerstone of asthma management and can be accomplished by:

- Using low-dust bedding alternatives.
- Soaking or steaming hay.
- Feeding forage alternatives such as haylage or complete feeds.
- Ensuring good ventilation in stables.
- Not sweeping or cleaning stalls while horses are present.
- Maximizing turnout time, if seasonal allergies are not a factor.

Your veterinarian might prescribe medications to help your horse breathe easier, such as bronchodilators, corticosteroids, mucolytics, and immunomodulatory drugs. Affected horses can also benefit from omega-3 fatty acid supplementation. Medication might need to be adjusted seasonally or based on management changes.



When to Call Your Vet

Contact your veterinarian if you observe:

- Increased respiratory effort at rest.
- Persistent or worsening cough.
- Flared nostrils or pronounced abdominal breathing.
- Reluctance to move or exercise.
- Yellow or green nasal discharge.
- Loss of appetite or weight loss.
- Fever (above 101.5°F/38.6°C).
- No improvement after treatment.
- Return of clinical signs after a period of control.

Severe respiratory distress with open-mouth breathing, blue/purple mucous membranes, and collapse are emergencies requiring immediate veterinary attention.