

Common Equine Eye Problems

LARGE ANIMAL EMERGENCY & CRITICAL CARE

Signs of Ocular Disorders in Horses

When horses are affected with problems involving their eyes, common signs include squinting and excessive tearing. These signs indicate that the horse's eye is painful. The whole eye may appear cloudy, or you may notice a small irregular area on the surface of the eye. You may also notice redness in the eye or swelling around the eye.

When to contact the Veterinarian

Any problem with your horse's eyes warrants a call to the veterinarian. Your veterinarian will likely want to come perform an ophthalmic exam to determine the problem. Many diseases of the equine eye progress quickly, and delaying treatment could make the problem much worse, even to the point of causing the horse to lose vision in the eye.

What to expect during the eye exam

For the safety of your horse, and to improve the thoroughness of the exam, your veterinarian will likely sedate your horse before beginning the exam. The veterinarian may also use numbing agents to desensitize the eye and temporarily immobilize the eyelid to allow for a more complete examination. After carefully examining the eye, your veterinarian will use fluorescein stain to look for corneal ulcers. Depending on the condition, the veterinarian may also choose to perform other procedures, such as measuring the pressure inside the eye or dilating the eyes to allow examination of the retinas.

Treatment

The treatment for your horse's eye condition depends on the specific diagnosis. Your veterinarian will likely prescribe ointments or solutions to apply to your horse's eye. These medications may include antibiotics or anti-fungal drugs. In addition, atropine will likely be used to dilate the pupil and reduce pain. Some conditions may warrant steroid use. It is very important to consult a veterinarian before using any of these medications in the horse's eye, as choosing the wrong medication could worsen the problem. If your horse is difficult to treat or will require long term treatment, your veterinarian may choose to place a subpalpebral lavage system. Your veterinarian may also prescribe an oral or injectable anti-inflammatory, such as Banamine®. It is very important to monitor the problem for improvement or regression.



Common Diseases

Corneal Ulcers: One of the most common problems diagnosed in the horse's eye is a superficial corneal ulcer. The cornea is the clear layer covering the front of the horse's eye. Corneal ulcers are erosions in the surface of the cornea. They are most often caused by trauma, such as when the horse scratches its eye or when foreign material, such as sand, becomes lodged in the horse's eye. Corneal ulcers are very painful for the horse. They can range from mild superficial ulcers that respond well to treatment, to deeper or complicated ulcers that may require intensive treatment.

Uveitis: Inflammation of the eye, or uveitis, is another common problem of the equine eye. Uveitis can occur secondary to other problems, but sometimes no clear cause is identified. Some horses are affected by Equine Recurrent Uveitis (ERU), which causes intermittent flare-ups of uveitis in one or both eyes. The cause of ERU has not yet been clearly identified.

Fungal Keratitis: Some horses may develop fungal infections secondary to corneal ulceration. Fungal infection of the cornea is considered to be a severe problem and requires prompt and aggressive treatment.

References: 1) Allbaugh, R.A. How To Perform a Thorough Equine Eye Exam in the Field. <https://aaep.org/sites/default/files/issues/OphthalAllbaugh.pdf> 2) UC Davis - The Equine Eye. http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/ceh/local_resources/pdfs/pubs-HR27-1-bkm-sec.pdf