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## The Very Scary Choking Horse

You dump feed for everyone; head off to the feed room to clean and set up for the next feeding. Heading back out to check everyone you notice one of your horses acting very strange. Stretching their neck, opening their mouth, maybe gagging and there may even be grain or hay coming out of the nose. Some horses will display very aggressive colic symptoms such as; rolling, stretching and throwing themselves against stall walls or fences. What the heck is going on?!?!

You are experiencing a choke. The most important thing to know; **don't** panic, your horse can STILL breathe. Luckily, horses choke very differently than humans. We choke at the back of our mouth, blocking our airway so that we can't breathe. A choking human is in big trouble without very rapid assistance. Horses, however, experience a blockage in the esophagus so they can continue to breathe. The blockage is usually made up of grain but sometimes carrots or apples are the culprit, especially in older horses.

So the hard part now is keeping calm. This can be very difficult while your horse is upset but this is very important. Your first step will be to place your horse in a quiet area away from other horses. Next, turn a hose on to a trickle and place it in the corner of your horse's mouth. The goal is not to force water down the esophagus but to get moisture in the mouth and get the tongue moving. We recommend trying this for no longer than 20 minutes.

A few Don'ts:

**Don't** try to force water or mineral oil into your horse. This can increase the risk of aspiration.

**Don't** walk your horse. Keeping them as calm as possible is very important

**Don't** wait to call us. We will often advise waiting at least 20 minutes before we head out but by calling us right away we can help you assess your horse

If after 20 minutes your horse continues to display signs of choking, it is time for a visit from Springhill Equine. On arrival, we will assess your horse's lungs to make sure no material has been aspirated in to the airway. Next we will give a very heavy dose of

sedation and a muscle relaxer. This causes your horse to drop their head and also relaxes the esophagus making step two easier.

We will then use a nasogastric tube and bucket of water to flush the choke out through the nose and mouth. We pass a tube similar to what happens when we treat a colic. This is the most rewarding part for us. You will most likely see feed material coming out with lots of water, which generally results in a Veterinarian covered in said feed material. Once we are able to pass the tube into the stomach we will then pull the tube slowly while continuing to lavage with water.

Follow up care is generally limited to mashes for the next few days. We will add anti-inflammatories, such as; Bute or Banamine, only if the choke was going on for an extended period of time.

Occasionally, we see a severe choke that has resulted in aspiration of feed material into the lungs. This can be a very serious complication which must be aggressively treated with both injectable and oral antibiotics. This usually results from a prolonged choke episode or in some of our geriatric patients.

Chokes can be very scary but keeping calm and calling Springhill Equine promptly will have your horse back to normal in no time!

