



Springhill Large Animal Veterinarians

12717 NW 39th Avenue

Gainesville, FL 32606

Ofc: 352.331.8434 Fax: 352.332.6552

springhillvets@cox.net

Dr. Randy Emmons Dr. Erica Lacher

Spring 2005

Heaves in Florida



Many horses in Florida experience a type of asthma that begins occurring in late Spring to early Summer. This is known as heaves. These horses often begin with an occasional cough, progressing to difficulty breathing out and wheezing. They may also display nasal discharge. Much like asthma in humans, heaves symptoms often escalate in response to allergens in the area such as pollen and mold, with most horses in Florida being allergic to grass pollens. This disease is progressive, meaning the signs will get worse over time (days to weeks to years), but not contagious.

We use several different tests to diagnose heaves. Some horses can be diagnosed through a routine physical exam. These are usually the more severely affected horses. If we suspect heaves but your horse is not displaying the usual signs we will progress to more advanced testing. The most common test is a Broncho-Alveolar Lavage (BAL). This involves passing a long tube down into the lungs, injecting small amounts of saline then removing the saline. When the saline is suctioned off, cells and debris from the lungs come along for the ride. This can then be analyzed microscopically to determine if your horse has heaves, low level pneumonia or other infectious problems.

Management changes are the key to helping manage heaves horses. Keeping affected horses stabled as much as possible reduces their exposure to grass pollens. We also recommend feeding low dust feeds or moistening grain before feeding. Hay should also be soaked for a minimum of 10-15 minutes to reduce dust.

Medical treatment involves reducing the allergic response of the immune system and opening the airways with bronchodilators. The two most commonly used therapeutics are prednisolone (a steroid) and hydroxyzine (an antihistamine). Hydroxyzine is generally our first choice for mild to moderately affected horses. When hydroxyzine is no longer effective we will switch to prednisolone. If your horse does not respond to these treatments we will step them up to inhaled medications. These allow larger doses of drugs to be placed directly into the lungs.

Heaves has long been a battle for horse owners but with new therapeutics available today we can keep horses active and comfortable for many years. We will be happy to examine your horse and discuss diagnostic and treatment options if you suspect your horse has heaves.