

Recurrent Airway Obstruction



Hayward, WI 54843

715-462-4662

leadingedgevets@gmail.com

leadingedgevets.com

Recurrent Airway Obstruction, more commonly referred to as 'Heaves', is a respiratory ailment of middle-aged to aged horses. The pathophysiology of heaves is lower airway (small airway) inflammation and bronchoconstriction in response to allergen exposure. The most common environmental factor that precedes an episode is organic dust from moldy hay and straw. But, horses have been reported to have episodes secondary to dust from sand and bedding, non-moldy hay and on hot-humid days.

Horses with classic heaves will have flared nostrils, breathe with an increased effort and use their abdominal muscles to force air out, coughing, wheezing and increase frequency of breathing. Average age of first episode is nine years old and there are no breed or gender predispositions. However, if both the dam and sire are affected with heaves; their offspring are approximately 40% more likely to also have heaves.

Treatment: While there is no cure for heaves, treatment is targeted at decreasing the severity of the current episode and changing management to prevent episodes in the future. Corticosteroids are utilized to decrease the lower airway inflammation and bronchodilators may be added in order to further dilate the airways. The single most important treatment is environmental management to reduce allergen exposure. Medication will alleviate clinical signs of disease, but respiratory disease will return after medication is discontinued if the horse remains in the allergen-challenged environment. The most common offending agent is organic dust from moldy hay and straw. Hay does not have to appear overtly moldy to precipitate an episode in a sensitive horse. If possible, horses should be maintained at pasture with fresh grass as the source of roughage. Round bale hay is particularly allergenic and a common reason for treatment failure. Especially in the northern states, hay must be fed during the winter months. To decrease allergen exposure from hay, hay nets have been utilized to contain and reduce dust release, soaking hay in water, hay cubes or a pelleted diet can also be utilized in severe cases. Although horses with heaves are not allergic to "dust", their airways are hyperactive to nonspecific stimuli and they should not be pastured near a dry, dusty road or paddock. Straw bedding and indoor boarding should be avoided.