



Down on the Farm

Mouth Injuries In Horses

by HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Horses sometimes suffer mouth injuries, ranging from punctures and/or lacerations to foreign objects jammed into the tissues or between the teeth. Dr. Debra Powell (Assistant Professor, Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute) has seen a few horses who picked up small pieces of wire that became lodged in the mouth. “The owner sees the horse drooling and realizes there is something wrong with the mouth,” she says.

Even though horses are better than cattle at sorting out foreign material from their feed, they still occasionally get something in the mouth that may puncture the tissues or become lodged. Wire, for instance, is commonly baled up in hay, and may be chopped up by the baler.

“The wire we found in one horse was about 10 centimeters long. It had slid up under the tongue where the horse couldn’t dislodge it. We had to send that horse to an equine hospital for surgical removal of the wire, under general anesthesia. It was deeply imbedded and had been there awhile,” says Powell.

“We also saw a foal who had picked up a very small hypodermic needle that had been lost in the stall—and disappeared into the bedding. The foal found it, and it was lodged in the foal’s mouth. We gave the foal a local anesthetic in order to remove the needle, after we used an ultrasound machine to locate it in the mouth.”

She’s also seen horses with punctured tongues. “One of these occurred because someone was trying to deworm the horse with a metal cannula, designed for use in cattle. They had a large jug of dewormer and were using the cannula—which was accidentally shoved into the side of the horse’s mouth, puncturing the soft tissue.”

Another instance occurred where a horse at a boarding facility suffered a mouth injury when turned out wearing a halter. The horse had apparently caught the halter on some-



A horse with a paralyzed lip and tongue due to nerve damage from a mouth injury. The lip droops and the tongue is flacid (the horse has little control of it) on the side of the mouth that is affected.

thing, pulled back, stretching the halter to the point of having the noseband end up in the corner of the horse’s mouth, cutting the corners of the mouth. “This was resolved by removing the halter and applying ointment to the cut in the corner of the mouth,” she says.

“Another injury involved a foal that was kicked in the face by its mother, injuring the mouth. She kicked him in the side of the face and broke off some of his baby teeth. Those were imbedded into his gum and had to be removed,” says Powell.

Tongue injuries sometimes occur if a person ties a horse with bridle reins and the horse sets back. There is also a risk for injury if the horse is wearing a bridle, dragging the reins. If he steps on a rein and jerks his head up, the bit may cut his tongue. A horse may accidentally bite his tongue if he suffers a blow or kick that closes his teeth on the tongue, or falls and hits his head and bites his tongue. “We have a horse right now who has a piece of his tongue missing, but we don’t know what happened. He was a donated horse and the people who donated him said that he came to them that way,” she says.

In some instances a horse may lose the end of the tongue or a large piece of it, by accidentally biting it off. An injury like this would bleed profusely, but would eventually heal, and the horse is usually able to adapt and learn how to eat and swallow with the impairment. This type of tongue injury would create difficulties with biting, however, and the horse would probably do better in some type of bitless bridle.

Injuries may also occur if an overly aggressive person uses a chain shank through the horse’s mouth for restraint purposes. “If they yank on it too hard, this may tear the corners of the mouth,” says Powell.

An inappropriate use of certain types of twitches may cause injury. “The horse’s lip can be readily injured if the twitch has a wire loop. I’ve seen horses with cuts and tears on the upper lip and realize that someone put a wire twitch on that horse. These are sometimes deep enough to need stitches. If a horse restrained with that type of twitch and pulls away from the person holding it, the thin wire will cut through the skin of the lip,” she explains.

Injuries inside the mouth can sometimes be difficult to detect and diagnose, especially if they are far back in the mouth. Some horse owners may not realize how deep the mouth is (extending back as far as the eyes) and even if they look inside the mouth, it’s hard to see back past the front teeth and front part of the tongue. There may be visible clues if the injury is close to the front of the mouth, or if the front part of the tongue is swollen. You may be able to see partway back into the mouth with a flashlight, if the horse will hold his mouth open for you. In some instances, however, the owner may not suspect a mouth injury unless the horse stops

eating, or is bleeding or drooling from the mouth, or acting like he's trying to spit something out. If something seems wrong, have a veterinarian examine the horse.

The veterinarian can sedate the horse and use a speculum to hold the mouth open, making it easier to view the whole mouth without the horse resisting. It's much safer, this way, to do a thorough examination. If the horse is protesting, he may crunch down and injure your fingers if you are trying to do this on your own.

Some injuries bleed profusely because the mouth and tongue have an excellent blood supply. On the flip side, this good circulation helps an injury heal quickly. There are some major arteries and nerves that may cause serious problems, however, if these are damaged.

"Depending on where the mouth injury is, it may sometimes result in some paralysis if certain nerves are damaged. One major nerve (the hypoglossal nerve) runs under the tongue on either side, for instance, and may be affected if a foreign object is jammed against it and punctures or lacerates it. If this nerve is damaged, the horse would have a hard time using his tongue for eating and drinking; tongue action is also important for swallowing. Damage to this nerve may also result in some paralysis of the lower lip, but mainly affects the tongue," says Powell.

In these situations the horse's lip may droop on the side that was injured, and the tongue may not be as mobile on that side. The horse may have trouble keeping their mouth completely closed and the tongue may bulge out a little on that side. They have trouble drinking because they cannot

completely close their mouth on that side (and therefore cannot produce adequate suction). They may not be able to sip water, but can usually manage to drink if they can stick their muzzle and mouth completely underwater. This entails holding their breath while their nose is immersed. The water must always be deep enough that the horse can stick their nose/mouth down into it far enough to cover the corners of their mouth.

Horses occasionally develop an abscess in the mouth if sharp seed awns (from barley, cheat grass, foxtail, bristle grass or some other sticky plants) end up in the hay and become embedded in the mouth. This is good reason to carefully check the hay you feed.

"Another precaution: when using old tires as hay feeders, make sure they don't have wire belting for reinforcement. Once those are badly worn, the small wires become exposed. If they break off in the feed, or if the horse chews on the tire, these could injure the mouth," says Powell. Cables of any kind may also fray and break down, shedding tiny pieces of wire.

When repairing fences, keep track of old nails, staples or pieces of wire that might end up in the grass, bedding or hay. Carry a container to collect any of these things. "It also helps if you have a magnet and go over the area afterward," advises Powell.

In barns and stalls, make sure any light fixtures have protective covers so that if they become accidentally broken, bits of glass won't end up in hay or bedding. "A lot of barns now use fluorescent lights and these definitely need a covering. If they blow out the glass may shatter and become a danger in the horse's stall." 🐾



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