

EYE PROBLEMS IN THE HORSE

Without wishing to sound pessimistic, I have come to one over-riding conclusion after dealing with eye problems in the horse over the last thirty years. My conclusion is that the severity of any eye condition is often vastly under-estimated by the owner or keeper of the horse and the ensuing delay in seeking a qualified opinion can result in unnecessary levels of eye pain for the horse and much more chance of permanent impairment of vision or even loss of an eye.

Always try to remember how painful a piece of dirt is lodged in one's own eye and if your horse is showing recognisable signs of eye pain then do not delay in seeking help to minimise the pain and possible subsequent loss of vision.

There are a few absolutely cardinal signs of eye pain. They are:-

- 1/ Excess tear production and tear staining down the face.
- 2/ Photophobia; meaning the horse is reluctant to leave the dark shadows for brightly lit areas.
- 3/ Holding the eye closed, or semi-closed especially when approached. (blepharospasm).
- 4/ Rubbing at the eye.

In these circumstances it is absolutely vital not to delay and to ask a vet to minutely examine every part of the eye. That can be impossible when the horse is in eye pain without resorting to some special measures. While wondering why I spent so much time learning dreary Anatomy at university this is one example of why it was necessary. By intimately knowing the nerve pathways to the eyelids they can be temporarily paralysed with a regional nerve block to allow a good look at the surface of the eyeball (cornea) and its inner workings.

Here are a few examples of conditions that are sometimes vastly underestimated, often with tragic results.

EYELID INJURIES

Horses are always damaging themselves one way or another and generally they are pretty good at healing themselves. Often when called to a wound on a lower limb for instance I often prefer to leave the injury unstitched, particularly if it is heavily contaminated. However, while a small imperfection in the skin of a leg is quite acceptable, the margin of the eyelid must be restored to perfection or the ensuing scar tissue may rub on the cornea causing intractable pain, scarring and eventual blindness.

CONJUNCTIVITIS AND CORNEAL ULCERS.

Conjunctivitis means an inflammation of the inner, pink margins of the eyelids and results in a yellow, sticky discharge. This condition responds readily to topical antibiotic therapy but too often other conditions are confused for a simple conjunctivitis. The original condition can be something completely different within the eye with the

conjunctivitis arising purely from the horse rubbing its painful eye. Most commonly there is a small foreign body hidden in the eyelid margins rubbing against the surface of the cornea or a tiny injury to the cornea causing pain and untold damage. It may take only a few hours for a significant ulcer to form on the cornea and particularly if it is treated inappropriately (e.g. with drops or ointment containing corticosteroids) or is contaminated with a particular bacterium such as Pseudomonas then the ulcer can 'sink' or 'melt' through the depth of the eye and result in rupture of the eyeball.

UVEITIS

Conditions deep within the eye can cause all the cardinal signs of eye pain. The most common of these is iritis (sometimes known as moon blindness because it can cyclically recur within the same eye) where the muscles of the iris which surround the lens go into spasm. Cramp in any muscle is extremely painful but spasm within the eyeball must be of the worst kind imaginable. Lasting damage within the eye will occur if not treated promptly. Treatment is not complicated, but finding the cause of this eye condition can be very involved.

In conclusion all I would say is your horse has only got two eyes and he needs them both. When eye problems arise he cannot tell you just how much it hurts. It really pays to be vigilant and think of the worst possible scenario and then things hopefully can only get better!!