

Practical Management and Herbal Relief of Respiratory Allergies

Anyone who has owned a horse with COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) or Hayfever can fully appreciate how limiting these conditions can be for a horse's competitive career and, in the case of COPD (otherwise known as Heaves, it is a disease similar to human asthma), can even be life threatening. The good news is that consistent good management of these horses combined with herbal treatment could help your horse to fully recover from or effectively control the symptoms of these diseases.

The first question to ask is, "What is an allergy?" Simply put, this is an over-reaction by the immune system to a minor, non-life threatening irritant. Common irritants are dust, fungal spores, pollens, ammonia, herbicides, pesticides, soaps, disinfectants and pollution from traffic or factory areas. The immediate and most effective course of action is to try to identify the irritant and remove it from your horse's environment. This is not always possible, and in many cases, once a horse has become sensitive to one irritant they often become sensitive to others.

Control measures for COPD should include removal of dusty bedding. Rubber floors are ideal for these horses, but if it's not feasible then paper bedding is the next best option. If you cannot source paper bedding then wood shavings can be used, provided that they have minimal dust and check that the wood has not been treated with chemicals that may further aggravate your horse's condition. Always ensure that these horses have VERY clean bedding, and never use the deep litter system as that will increase harmful ammonia levels (there are bedding additives commercially available that help to reduce ammonia levels). These horses should be stabled away from hay storage areas, and should only be fed good quality hay, preferably from floor level (or at least lower than chest level) as this mimics the natural eating posture, which will reduce dust inhalation and promotes drainage of the airways, thus flushing out dust and other allergens. Soaking the hay can help to reduce dust, and a good partial fibre alternative for hay would be soaked unmolassed sugar beet pulp (low in sugar) flakes. Always dampen concentrate feed.

Symptoms of Hayfever include weepy eyes and a clear nasal drip, frequent sneezing, coughing, vigorous eye and nose rubbing (on the knee or even along the ground), headshaking and nose flipping. Often these symptoms get worse during or after work, and one helpful course of action is to attach a nose veil to the bridle (ask your local tack shop, or use an old pair of nylon stockings to loosely cover the nostrils) while riding in order to filter out irritants. Starchy carbohydrates can promote excessive mucous, so reducing grains in your horse's diet is a very helpful step. Energy can be substituted with vegetable oils (which

are helpful in themselves because some contain low levels of Omega 3's and 6's and phytosterols, which are mildly anti-inflammatory and support the immune system), sunflower seeds, lucerne and soaked low sugar sugar-beet pulp flakes. Runny noses, excessive mucous, sinus problems and poor quality hooves can be signs of potassium deficiency, in which case supplementing Apple Cider Vinegar (ACV - feed 30-50ml daily) is very helpful as it is a rich natural source of potassium. Some people have found ACV relieves their asthma, so it could also be suitable for horses with COPD. ACV is very safe and has numerous health benefits so is incredibly good for any horse, but particularly those with allergies.

Helpful herbs include:

Garlic and Aniseed – both expectorant so help to expel irritants from the airways

Eyebright (otherwise known as Euphrasia) – ideal for any congestion in the head as it soothes inflammation of the mucous membranes, is a specific for hayfever and sinus infections. Bathe eyes daily with a tea made from this herb in order to soothe them when weeping or inflamed.

Liquorice root and Marshmallow root and leaf – are expectorant and demulcent so help to soothe and protect the airways. Liquorice root is also antibacterial and antiviral so can also help to prevent sinus or lung infections, to which these horses can have an increased susceptibility.

Comfrey leaf – it's mucilaginous content soothes the airways, is mildly anti-inflammatory and improves circulation.

Chamomile flowers – supports the nervous system, which in the case of allergies, is involved with an over-reactive immune system.

Buckwheat herb (not the seed) – can be helpful as it has an antihistamine property (in humans it reduces the reaction to allergens, but thus far less positive results have been seen from it in the treatment of horses), and the other benefit being high rutin content, which will help strengthen the walls of weakened capillaries.