

Ask A Vet: Painful Eye Injury Needs Addressing

Saturday, June 3, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We were recently trail riding at Potato Creek State Park. When we returned from the day's ride, I noticed my horse's right eye was watering profusely. He was holding the eyelids half closed and would squeeze them together when I tried to look at the eye. It eventually cleared up on its own by the time we trailered home. What can I do if this happens again?

Dear Reader,

I am glad that your horse's eye recovered so quickly. The equine eye is a fragile organ that requires immediate investigation when things go wrong. Eye injuries, infections and inflammation can cause severe pain and might progress rapidly, resulting in permanent damage. Identifying abnormalities and taking action sooner, rather than later, really makes a difference in the overall outcome.

It is usually easy to see when your horse has an issue with its eye. Increased blinking, obvious squinting, and holding the eye tightly closed are common first symptoms. The area around the eye including the eyelids may be swollen. Excessive tearing or a change in discharge to a thicker consistency may occur. If in doubt, comparing the two eyes may help. I find this to be a very useful tool when I am not quite sure if a particular part of the anatomy is normal for that horse. Rubbing an eye continually can be a sign of discomfort. Anything that looks like a growth on the eyelids, conjunctiva or the eye itself should be examined by a veterinarian to determine if it is cancerous.

Almost every abnormality in your horse's eye should be assessed by your veterinarian. Do not begin treatment with an ointment you have left over or bought over the counter until speaking to your veterinarian first. Some ointments contain steroids which can make a scratched cornea much worse. Your vet can advise you on which ointments are safe to use as well as staining the cornea to make small scratches or corneal ulcers much easier to see. Be aware that some horses can be very sensitive to your efforts to approach a hurting eye. Many will squeeze their eye shut with more force than you may realize. Some will throw their head from side to side or up into the air. Your veterinarian can use sedation and possibly a nerve block to temporarily numb the upper eyelid to facilitate examination.

Even though some ocular conditions can be self-limiting, such as "dirt in the eye", a seemingly innocuous issue can progress overnight into an emergency. Don't hesitate to investigate quickly and call your veterinarian for advice. Early intervention leads to clear vision.

-Dr. Wade Hammond