

Eye Injuries

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The most frequent eye related problems in horses are corneal ulcers (abrasions to the surface of the eye), eyelid lacerations and uveitis. Clinical signs of an eye emergency include excessive tearing or discharge, spasmodic squinting, holding the eye partially or completely closed, or constriction of the pupil. Additionally, changes in appearance of the eye and its surrounding structures such as swelling of the eyelids, increased redness of the usually pink tissue around the eye, and cloudiness of the cornea are signs of an eye problem.



The most common injury of the eye is a corneal ulcer. Ulcers occur when the surface of the eye comes in contact with a foreign object such as a hay stem, stick or surface of a stall wall, leaving a defect in the integrity of the surface of the eye. A horse with a corneal ulcer will usually have symptoms of a painful eye and/or a hazy bluish appearance of the surface of the eye. Corneal ulcers are diagnosed with a fluorescing stain applied directly to the cornea during examination. Treatment usually includes topical antibiotics because the cornea is easily infected. Other medications may be indicated on a case by case basis.

Eyelid lacerations are commonly caused when the eyelid simply gets snagged on a piece of stall hardware, an overlooked raised nail or piece of wire. These injuries are much easier to diagnose than most other eye emergencies but are equally important to seek rapid veterinary attention. Most lacerations involving the margin of the eyelid will require repair with suture. The integrity of the eyelid margins is vital for maintaining a proper tear film on the surface of the eye. An irregular eyelid margin can cause recurring and chronic eye irritation.



Uveitis, or inflammation in the interior portion of the eye, occurs when inflammatory mediators are released causing leakage of damaging proteins into the internal structures of the eye. There are many different causes of uveitis including blunt or penetrating trauma, corneal ulcers, systemic diseases, and unknown causes to name a few. Most horses with uveitis will show signs of a painful eye that appears cloudy. Diagnosis is usually made with findings from a complete eye examination including the use of an ophthalmoscope. Rapid and aggressive treatment, often with multiple topical and systemic medications, is essential in minimizing the possibility of permanent damage to the internal structures of the eye.

Injuries of the equine eye should be considered an emergency, and owners should consult their veterinarian immediately when a potential problem has been identified. Delaying treatment or instituting improper treatment on some ocular conditions can lead to permanent damage to the eye and loss of vision.