

## **CONJUNCTIVITIS AND YOUR HORSE**

### **(Or Why Are My Horse's Eyes Always Draining?)**

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One of the most common eye conditions seen in horses, especially during the summer months, is conjunctivitis. Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the inner lining (pink tissue) of the upper and lower eyelids. This results in a "red eye". The other clinical signs of conjunctivitis in the horse include swelling, and discharge (tearing, mucoid, mucopurulent). It can be in one or both eyes and can also be associated with eyelid swelling.

The causes of conjunctivitis are many and include both primary and secondary diseases. Secondary conjunctivitis is common and occurs when another serious ocular problem causes inflammation of the conjunctiva. It is very important that these underlying causes of conjunctivitis, such as corneal ulcers, glaucoma, and uveitis, are ruled out as these diseases are vision threatening and can result in the loss of the eye if not treated appropriately and quickly. A careful ophthalmic examination performed by your primary care veterinarian, sometimes with the consultation of a veterinary ophthalmologist, will rule the serious diseases out. Ophthalmic tests that are performed include tear production testing, fluorescein stain, intraocular pressure measurement, and, when indicated, cytology, culture and sensitivity and biopsy.

Once a serious ocular problem has been ruled out, causes of primary conjunctivitis are still many and include immune mediated (follicular, eosinophilic, allergic, nodular), infectious (bacterial, fungal, viral, parasitic), trauma, neoplasia (squamous cell carcinoma), and solar injury. It is important to remember that conjunctivitis is merely a clinical sign and not an etiologic (causative) diagnosis. The ophthalmic tests mentioned previously can

frequently narrow down or result in a diagnosis. Allergic conjunctivitis is a very common cause of conjunctivitis seen in the horse especially in the spring and summer months in Florida. It typically presents with signs of tearing/mucoid discharge from both eyes. Signs of ocular pain (squinting) are not present. Less common but still frequent causes include viral (Equine herpes), bacterial, and solar injury. Parasitic conjunctivitis (Onchocerciasis, Habronemiasis, Thelaziasis) may be seen in horses that are not on an adequate deworming regimen.

Treatment of conjunctivitis is directed at the underlying cause. Medical therapy for conjunctivitis is typically delivered via topical ophthalmic medications. Topical antibiotic therapy is the mainstay of initial therapy. It can be used safely in the period before a diagnosis is obtained if the case is believed to be bacterial, and to prevent secondary bacterial infections when the tissue is very inflamed or traumatized. Topical broad-spectrum antibiotics, such as oxytetracycline or triple antibiotic ophthalmic ointment are good initial choices.

Extreme caution should be exercised in the use of topical anti-inflammatory therapy especially the use of topical steroids. Here in Florida, where fungal pathogens are endemic, the use of a topical steroid can quickly lead to a fungal infection of the cornea and result in the loss of the eye. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories are safer (diclofenac, flurbiprofen, etc) and are frequently used in allergic conjunctivitis. Recurrent allergic conjunctivitis can be difficult to treat and require experimentation with multiple medications (antihistamines, mast cell stabilizers) and environmental modifications (stall bedding, turnout time, fly mask usage).

It is important to remember that any time your horse's eye/eyes are red, irritated, and have discharge, you should consult your primary care veterinarian immediately. Serious ocular diseases such as corneal ulcer and

uveitis are more likely to present with discharge from the affected eye only. Less serious diseases such as allergic conjunctivitis usually cause signs in both eyes. Therapy for primary causes of conjunctivitis can be initiated once serious ocular conditions that result in conjunctivitis have been ruled out. Having a topical broad spectrum antibiotic on hand (without steroids in it!) to place in your horse's eye 3-4 times a day is important in any condition that causes ocular discharge and redness. Make sure your horse is examined and therapy initiated within 24 hours of clinical signs starting to avoid potential sight-threatening complications. Routine conjunctivitis usually resolves within 5 to 7 days if the underlying cause is diagnosed and treated appropriately. Recurrent problems are more common in viral and allergic disease.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email [info@brandonequine.com](mailto:info@brandonequine.com) with any questions regarding this topic.

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