

Allergies

Dangers of mold, dust & pollen... Equine Allergies

Allergies are a very common and very frustrating problem for both horses and owners. Hypersensitivity allergic reactions are primarily caused by exposure to dust, molds, and other air pollutants. There also appears to be a genetic predisposition to an individual horse developing environmental sensitivities.

Allergies in horses can manifest as respiratory disease or skin problems or a combination of the two.

The Cause

Allergens are anything in the environment that evokes a hyperreactive immune response; examples include mold in poorly made hay, dust in barns, grass, tree and weed pollen in the air, or manmade chemicals such as fly sprays.

Respiratory Problems

The most common response to allergens in horses is allergic bronchitis, which eventually progresses to a condition called COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease). This condition is commonly known as "heaves". It is a delayed hypersensitivity response to the inhaled allergens. COPD is similar to asthma and emphysema in people.

In the early stages of allergic bronchitis, the horse may have a clear to white nasal discharge, mild exercise intolerance, and an intermittent cough. As the condition progresses, you may see flared nostrils, labored breathing and a frequent deep, non-productive cough.

Symptoms may be evident all year round or may only be apparent when the specific allergens are at

their highest level. For grass pollens, this is primarily in the spring, for weed pollen, mainly in late summer and fall, while molds and dust become a bigger problem in the winter when horses are stabled in tightly closed barns.

Skin Conditions

Skin problems can also be caused by environmental allergies. The horse may be itchy, especially around the face, ears, belly and legs. Other times a horse will develop hives (round, quarter sized swellings) all over the body. Skin allergies can be caused by biting insects, inhalant pollens, bedding materials or synthetic products such as fly sprays or drugs.

Treatment

The treatment for allergies requires a combination of environmental management and medical therapy.

Environmental changes must be made in order to control the horse's allergies. Whenever possible, you must remove the material causing the allergic reaction. Environmental management includes both feed & housing changes.

Feeding Rules

Improper feed can cause the onset or severely exacerbate allergic bronchitis.

The most important thing is to provide a good quality hay that is free of both mold and dust!!! Improperly baled or cured hay is full of dust and mold spores.

- 2 Feed the horse on the ground to prevent him from breathing in allergens when eating.
- 3 Pelleted feed is preferred since it contains less dust than grain.
- 4 Feed the hay outside or provide pasture instead of hay.
- 5 Never feed round bales. Round bales are full of mold spores.

Also, horses burrow into the round bale and inhale all of the dust and allergens.

Barn Rules

Ideally, horses with allergies should be kept outside with access to a 3 sided shelter and never kept or brought into a barn!!!

- 1 Minimize dust in the barn and clean regularly to reduce mold exposure & ammonia buildup.
- 2 Do not keep hay in stalls or in lofts directly over horses.
- 3 Do not bed with straw-it is likely to contain mold spores.
- 4 Good ventilation is vital.

Medical Treatment

Medical therapy is divided into two categories - alleviating symptoms vs. desensitizing the horse.

You can reduce the allergy symptoms with medications such as antihistamines, steroids or bronchodilators. Antihistamines do not give consistent results. Steroids have potential side effects and should only be used on a short term basis. Bronchodilators are expensive but can temporarily help the horse breathe better.

Allergy Testing

Allergy testing and desensitization is generally the best method of treatment. A blood test is done to determine what items the horse is allergic to. The test covers grasses, weeds, trees, molds, insects & feed specific to the Midwest region.

After determining what allergens are a problem, desensitization medicine is formulated. Injections are given to slowly 'desensitize' the horse to those things in the environment that are the problem.

At Countrycare Animal Complex, we have been using this desensitization method for years with successful results. Treatment works better when the problem is addressed early (as allergic bronchitis) before COPD sets in.

