

DR NICK ROE IS A VETERINARIAN, 4\* EVENTER, WORLD CUP SHOWJUMPER, LECTURER IN EQUINE STUDIES AND A REGISTERED THOROUGHBRED TRAINER. IN THIS ARTICLE HE COVERS.....

# COMMON EYE PROBLEMS

The horse's eye is a delicate and intricate structure. If late on a Friday afternoon, you discover that your horse has tears streaming down his/her face, the eye is jammed shut and the front of the eyeball (cornea) reveals a cloudy blue haze (like a fogged-up window), then don't wait until Monday to call your veterinarian. In these cases, time is vital, and the longer the eye is left in this state the higher the likelihood of losing some vision, if not the whole eye.

The most common causes of a painful eye in a horse are a corneal ulcer (with or without a grass seed) and uveitis.

## CORNEAL ULCER

To examine the eye your vet may need to sedate your horse, plus or minus a nerve block to stop the blinking. A thorough examination of the surface of the cornea may require fluorescein staining as well as checking under the third eyelid for any hidden foreign bodies.



An obvious corneal ulcer

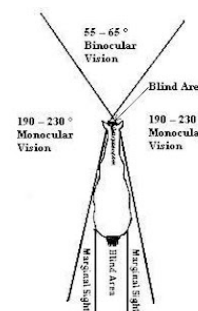
Treatment of most corneal ulcers is straightforward with topical antibiotics, atropine and anti-inflammatories, as well as keeping the eye out of bright sun, wind, and dust, preferably in a box with some sort of eye patch. Some horses struggle with the concept of eye drops and may require hospitalisation or the placement of a treatment catheter that is placed under the eyelid. A long tube is fed back and plaited into the mane so that medications can be administered much more easily.



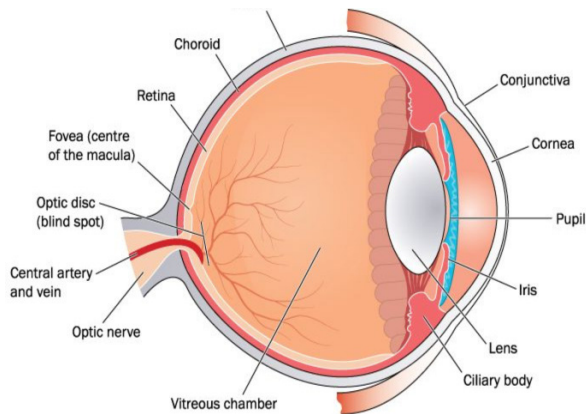
Catheter inserted to deliver medications.

Most ulcers should dramatically improve in 10-14 days. Unfortunately, some can require more investigation with cytology, culture, and sensitivity to identify an offending bacteria or fungus, as well as a few other surgical options that aim to assist the healing process.

Worst case scenario, the eye may need to be removed, which is not as bad as it sounds. Plenty of horses live a long, happy, and competitive life with one eye. They can cope because of the large range of vision they possess.



The horse's range of vision



Anatomy of the eye.

## UVEITIS

Horses with uveitis will present with mild to severe ocular pain and tearing. Mild pain appears as slight closing of the eyelid, severe as having the eyelid completely jammed shut. Prompt veterinary attention is necessary.

Uveitis is the inflammation of the uveal tract. The uveal tract is on the inside of the eye and is made up of the iris, ciliary body and choroid. Uveitis may be secondary to trauma and/or corneal ulcer, or it may be primary. The cause of primary uveitis is uncertain but there seems to be an immune component. Uveitis unfortunately is prone to recur, and Equine Recurrent Uveitis (ERU) is the major cause of blindness in horses.

Treatment is based around anti-inflammatories and atropine. You want to go early and go hard with treatment, so if there is definitely no ulcer present, corticosteroids both topical and systemic are indicated in the initial treatment, followed by a reasonably long course of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

## OCULAR DISCHARGE (RUNNY EYES)

On the other hand, if there is some tearing of one or both eyes with reddening of the underside of the eyelids, no squinting or pain and the whole of the cornea is clear, then you are likely dealing with conjunctivitis. Treatment involves application of various antibiotic eye ointments. Your vet may give you Opticlox or Orbenin which are penicillin based ointments that are very practical, as they only need to be applied once a day. If it is dusty and there are plenty of flies, then the mask type fly veils are very useful, but make sure you still check both eyes twice daily.

There is a tear duct which goes from under the third eyelid to just inside the nostril. Sometimes this becomes blocked. If you put fluorescein stain in the eye and after five minutes, there is no stain in the nose then you have a blocked nasolacrimal duct. Your vet will be able to unblock this with a flush.

Occasionally a horse will bang his eye or get hit in the eye with a flying clod of dirt, resulting in the equivalent of a black eye. The eyelids appear swollen and there may be some tearing but hopefully the cornea is clear. Fluorescein staining will confirm that no ulcer is present. If this is the case apply cold compresses to the eye, apply antibiotic ointment (Opticlox) and give anti-inflammatories if prescribed by your veterinarian. Cover the eye or put your horse in a darkened box, out of the wind and sunlight. As soon as there is any clouding of the cornea, or the eye is jammed shut, seek your veterinarian's advice.

The most important thing to remember is that a painful eye needs urgent veterinary attention. If unsure, you can always send photos or a short video to your vet to give them an idea of how urgent the eye problem may be.



Fluorescein stain in the eye.