

Corneal Ulcers

What is a Corneal Ulcer?-

Corneal Ulceration occurs when one or more layers of the cornea are damaged, usually caused by trauma. Unfortunately the horse's cornea heals more slowly than other species.

What You May See-

- A watery discharge from your horse's squinted eye, along with a small glob of thicker material built up in the corner of his eyelid.
- The eyeball appears cloudy instead of clear, and you notice fine, squiggly red lines, surrounding what looks like a nick in the cornea, the normally clear part of the eyeball.
- A constricted pupil
- The eye appears sensitive, because your horse clamps down his eyelid and pulls his head away when you touch the side of his face.

What Should You Do?

Call your veterinarian. This is an emergency. The nick in the cornea is an infected wound called a corneal ulcer. Without prompt veterinary treatment, a bacterial infection may cause the wound to get larger and deeper, increasing the risk that the eyeball itself will actually rupture, resulting in permanent damage. A corneal ulcer can not only affect the way your horse's eye looks, but can also leave your horse vision-impaired-or even completely blind in that eye. Cloudiness indicates swelling, or edema, in the cornea. If this swelling persists, it can consolidate into a white disk of permanent, vision-impairing scar tissue, which may prevent the cornea from ever returning to its crystal-clear former self. The red, squiggly lines are tiny blood vessels growing around the wound to carry healing nutrients to it. Ironically, these blood vessels do more harm than good. They thicken the cornea, limiting access to the wound by infection-fighting antibodies. They also increase the eye's opacity (cloudiness)-thus the chance your horse won't be able to see with that eye, even if the ulcer heals.

While you wait for the vet if it's sunny/and or windy, put a clean fly mask over your horse's halter as a shield. If you don't have a clean fly mask, lead your horse to a clean stall with no bedding or to one with wet bedding. Remove all feed if dusty (to prevent dust). Stand in or just outside your horse's stall while your horse is loose, as long as he's not rubbing his eye. If he starts to rub, either halter and hold him, or put him in crossies.

Move your horse to a dark, quiet stall to protect him from sunlight (which is painful to an ulcerated eye), bugs and wind (both can carry contaminants and dust into the ulcer). And to remove him from potential conflicts with other horses that may pick on him while he's preoccupied with pain. Eye pain can be excruciating, and your horse may try to rub his eye on a front leg, a hind hoof, a hay rack, a bucket edge, etc. This could irreversible damage to an eye that otherwise might've healed beautifully.

