



ASK THE VET

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RAO/Heaves: What is it and what can I do to help my horse?

RAO (Recurrent Airway Obstruction), also known as heaves, is a disease of chronic inflammation of the lower airways. The exact way that the environment causes this inflammation is poorly understood, but it is suggested that repeat exposure to pro-inflammatory agents contribute to this disease. Examples of these pro-inflammatory agents include molds, dust, bacteria, mites and noxious gases like ammonia.



The most important way to control your horses' exposure to these inflammatory agents is to be conscious of their environment. An ideal situation would be if a horse with RAO could live outside all of the time, but this is not always practical, nor does it always alleviate their clinical signs. Depending on the type of facility, the horse may spend time inside the barn, making it important to consider the state of the hay, shavings and ventilation of the stall and barn.

It is important consider where a horse spends most of their time in a stall. Typically, it is with their noses in the hay. All hays, no matter their cost or visual quality, contain dust and mold spores, which are two of the main triggers for the onset of RAO. Steaming hay kills the mold spores and eliminates the dust. If you have a horse with RAO, you would want to steam his hay whether your horse is in a stall or not to eliminate exposure to that dust and mold.

Currently it is common practice to soak hay for airway or allergy horses. However, it is important to recognize that soaking does not kill the mold spores, leaving a significant pro-inflammatory insult going into the horse. Additionally, soaked hay is often not very palatable and is the worst job in the barn in the winter! Steaming hay will increase the palatability of the hay, as well as be much more convenient and warm during the winter months.

What is also important to remember is that RAO/heaves comes about usually due to repeated exposure to these pro-inflammatory agents. Therefore, you may have a healthy horse today, but with consistent insults to the airway over time from dusty shavings, poor ventilation in the barn or the inherent risks of hay, it may just be a matter of time before your horse shows signs of lower airway disease. It is a common observation that some performance horses often cough a few times when warming up for exercise. This could be a very early warning sign that their airway is having difficulty managing the allergens or pro-inflammatory agents that are challenging them.

As a veterinarian, I am always looking at ways to help my clients be preventative with their horse care. What better way to prevent or slow the onset of airway disease than by

eliminating many of the causes by simply steaming their hay. Prevention of RAO is also very important because a horse with severe disease is difficult to manage. Once their clinical signs are severe, they not only need steamed hay and full time turnout, but they may also have to be medically managed with corticosteroids and bronchodilators. At this point, the horses often lose their ability to perform their athletic sports. Although cliché, prevention is key. Steaming hay, along with other safe management practices, is the best way to protect and prevent your horse from developing airway disease.

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