

Daniel P. Keenan, DVM  
Ron McAlister, DVM  
Lynsey D. Makkreel, DVM



## EYE EMERGENCIES

Injuries to the eye and surrounding areas of the head and face are relatively common in horses due to their inquisitive nature and as a result of 'arguments' with each other and with structures such as stable doors, fence posts and trees. Foreign material such as grass seeds and thorns may cause abrasions to the corneal surface or may even puncture the eye. A kick or other blow can cause serious damage to the eye as well as the eyelids and bones underneath. Eye problems should always be considered an emergency and seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

### Conjunctivitis

This is not in itself an emergency condition but can appear similar to, and often accompanies, more serious problems. Conjunctivitis is inflammation of the mucous membrane (pink lining) which surrounds the eyeball and lines the inner surface of the eyelids. This inflammation may be due to dust or fly irritation or can be due to infection. Most simple cases improve quickly with eye drops or ointment from the veterinarian..

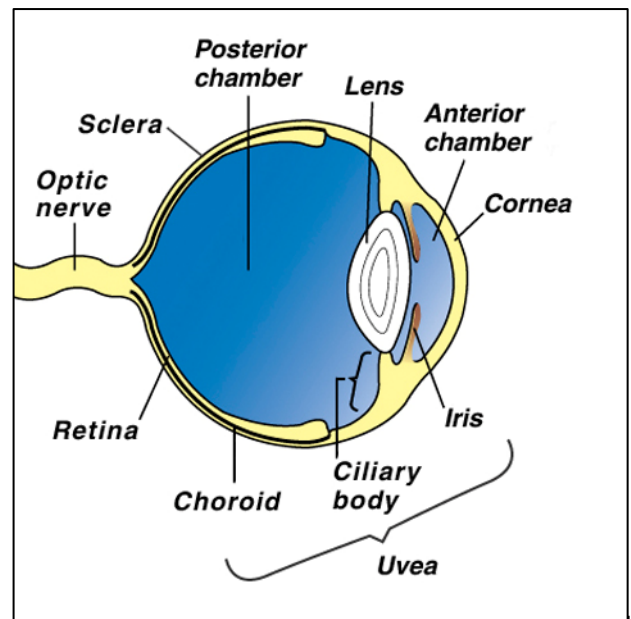


Diagram of cross section of the eye.

### Injuries to the eyelids and deeper tissues

This can range from bruising to full thickness wounds of the eyelids or surrounding tissues. Severe bruising may be associated with fracture of the bones around the eye. Your veterinarian should be called to examine any eye injury involving swelling around the eye or cuts to the eyelids. The eye itself may also be damaged. Eyelid injuries usually require surgical suturing. Severe damage may necessitate reconstructive surgery under general anesthesia. **NEVER, EVER SNIP OFF A TORN EYELID!** Your horse need eyelids and every attempt to reattach them should be made!



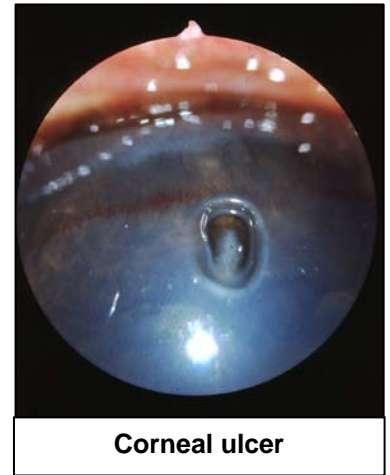
Traumatic injury to eye and eyelid

### Injuries to the eyeball

Blunt trauma, such as a blow to the eye, can cause inflammation and bleeding into the eye. In some cases the surface of the eye is damaged, usually causing an ulcer. If the ulcer is only superficial, the cornea heals quickly with minimal or no adverse effect to the eye or its sight. However, these are extremely painful and require prompt treatment for relief. Severe damage can result in perforation or laceration of the cornea, resulting in rupture of the eyeball. Between these two extremes lies a whole range of injuries which can involve any or all of the internal structures of the eye.

Any injury to the eye is very painful. There is usually a marked increase in tear production causing a watery eye. The conjunctiva becomes inflamed and appears redder than normal and the eyelids may be held tightly closed. You should call your veterinarian if your horse is showing these symptoms. During the early stages of inflammation and healing, the eye may appear cloudy or may contain blood and strands of yellowish material (fibrin and inflammatory debris). The pupil will tightly constrict in a painful eye.

Your veterinarian can apply some fluorescent dye to determine damage to the cornea. The eye can also be examined for internal damage with the use of an ophthalmoscope. To look into a horse's eye thoroughly, your veterinarian will need the horse to be cooperative and be in a darkened stable.



### **Management of eye injuries**

Always seek early veterinary advice following an eye injury to your horse or pony.

In most cases treatment will involve the use of eye ointment or drops in combination with oral or injectable anti-inflammatory and/or antibiotic medication. Do not use eye drops or ointments prescribed for another horse as they might contain the wrong medication or may spread infection or worsen the ulcer.

Eye ointments and drops usually need to be applied several times a day. In some cases this treatment must be continued for several weeks. It is important that medication goes into the eye rather than onto the eyelids and lashes. Treatment may require two people and even a twitch. If you continue to have trouble administering the treatment, speak to your veterinarian about alternative methods. In some severe injuries or in particularly difficult horses, it is possible to surgically place an indwelling polyethylene tube through the eyelid or nostril, allowing repeated treatments to be made remotely from the eye.



**Indwelling catheter to facilitate treatment**

Some penetrating injuries require suturing of the eye itself, which is performed under general anaesthesia, using specialized surgical equipment. Some corneal injuries require tissue grafts or temporary surgical closure of the eyelids to protect the wound until it heals. Rupture of or extreme trauma to the eyeball usually necessitates removal of the eye.

If your horse or pony has an eye injury or infection, the eye will be less painful if the horse is kept out of bright sunlight or other light source. A horse with a painful closed eye is more susceptible to being kicked or injured by another horse and may be more nervous and unpredictable than usual when approached on the injured side. Fly masks can shade, protect and keep flies from the eye, but the best place to recover is a stall in the middle of the barn, away from the doors, with a covering over the stall window.