



**TENNESSEE**  
*Equine Hospital*

**Heaves in Horses**  
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Tennessee allergens can be just as hard on horses as they are on people this time of year. Signs in horses may include a dry cough, runny nose or eyes, and increased effort breathing. Some horses will develop a more chronic (ongoing) form of this called heaves. Heaves, also known as recurrent airway obstruction (RAO), involves constriction of the small airways and increased mucus production within those airways similar to asthma in people. This narrows the small airways deep in the lungs, which makes it harder for horses to breathe. In response, horses will breathe harder and faster; some even develop increased muscle along their bellies known as a “heave line.”

There are two main forms of RAO: barn-associated and summer pasture-associated. In the barn form, episodes are triggered by mold or dust in the hay and environment. With the summer form, grass pollen and mold spores tend to be the culprits. Environmental management is key to controlling both forms. Horses that are worse in the barn should be turned out as much as possible and pasture-associated horses should be kept inside from Spring to early Fall. Stabling should be well-ventilated and environmental changes to minimize exposure to dust and molds are essential.

There is no cure for heaves, but many cases respond favorably to management changes. Other horses require medications to help open the airways and decrease inflammation in the lungs.

A diagnosis is often made based on classic signs and physical exam findings. In some cases, your veterinarian may recommend taking fluid samples from within the lungs to confirm the diagnosis and rule out other underlying causes. If your horse has a persistent cough, exercise intolerance, or tends to breath harder than normal, he may have heaves. Talk to your veterinarian for more information on diagnosing and managing this condition.