

Buyers' Guide

Your guide to buying respiratory supplements

With longer hours spent indoors, your horse may need extra help keeping his airways clear from dust and debris. Here's what to consider before choosing a respiratory product, plus we showcase 12 products on the market

Horses living in the wild have constant access to fresh air and a range of herbs and shrubs that increase their immunity and aid respiration.

Domesticated horses are far removed from this lifestyle and factors such as stabling, dusty bedding and feeding hay can all take their toll.

Winter is a time when horses are more likely to develop dust-related problems and may need a little extra help in the form of a respiratory supplement. But what do they actually do?

In general terms, respiratory supplements are designed to support a healthy respiratory tract. This allows the horse to breathe more easily and prevents the build up of dust in his lungs and airways.

Some claim to flush out toxins associated with lung stress, whereas others are said to soothe irritation and reduce inflammation and congestion in the airways.

The ingredients found in these supplements vary, but many contain herbs that are well known for supporting a healthy respiratory system.

Essential oils, vitamins A and C, and MSN are also commonly found in these products.

Independent equine nutritionist Alexandra Wesker warns you should rule out medical conditions before reaching for a supplement.

"Ask your vet to establish the cause of the problem," she advises. "A viral or bacterial infection, or infestation with lungworm, for example, require medical attention."

"If your horse suffers from recurrent airway obstruction (RAO) you may consider giving a respiratory supplement alongside providing good management and medical attention."

"RAO is an allergic reaction to dust and mould that causes inflammation of the respiratory tract."

"While a supplement can help to fight this inflammatory response, it can only be efficient if the source of irritation is removed."

"Horses suffering from RAO must be kept in a dust-free environment, preferably outdoors or alternatively in well-aerated stables."

Words: Nicky Moffatt; photo: Shutterstock.com/olga_j

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

BENEFICIAL INGREDIENTS

Depending on your horse's symptoms, look for ingredients that claim to reduce inflammation in the respiratory tract, repair tissue damage in the lungs or reduce the allergic response. For information, see the products on the next pages.

PALATABILITY

If your horse is a fussy feeder, choose a supplement that claims to be palatable or one you can administer via a syringe, rather than adding it to his feed. If in doubt, buy the product in the smallest size so you can test it on your horse before spending too much money.

LONG OR SHORT TERM RELIEF

Decide whether your horse needs temporary support – for example if he's on short-term box rest – or if he needs help with ongoing respiratory problems. Many supplements on the market claim to be suitable for both.

COMPETITION-SAFE INGREDIENTS

Take extra care if you compete, as some herbal supplements are not approved by the FEI (International Equestrian Federation). Check the FEI's list of banned substances and always read the product label before giving it to your horse.

10 TIPS FOR A HEALTHY RESPIRATORY SYSTEM

1 Turn your horse whenever possible: If the fields are trashed and are too muddy to turn out in, take your horse for walks in-hand. Or see if there is somewhere dry he can go for a few hours, such as an outdoor school or enclosed yard.

2 Provide good quality forage: Avoid feeding dusty or mouldy hay at all costs. If hay is dusty – and haylage isn't an option – soak or steam it before giving it to your horse. "Soaking hay will help but steaming tends to be even more effective," says equine nutritionist Alexandra Wesker. "Dampening hay has little effect."

3 Use dust-free bedding: If possible, choose a bedding that's free from dust, such as dust-free shavings, paper or wood pellets. Ensure you dig out the edges of the stable regularly to prevent the build-up of dust and mould spores.

4 Provide ventilation: If your horse is stabled, it is much better to open a window and put another rug on him than to restrict airflow. Fresh air will help to keep his airways clean and working efficiently.

"If your horse has RAO you could even install a fan in the stable," suggests Alexandra. "This will move air through and out of the stable, making small particles less likely to enter the horse's lungs."

5 Groom outside: Grooming your horse can generate a lot of dust. Groom him in an open space, rather than in his stable, to prevent the inhalation of dust.

6 Keep up to date with jabs: Equine influenza is a common problem amongst the horse population and can quickly be spread from horse to horse.

7 Work according to fitness: With less time to ride, your horse's fitness levels may drop during the winter months. Take this into account when riding him, as too much fast work with an unfit horse will put pressure on his airways.

8 Feed from the floor: "Roughage should always be placed on the ground if horses are kept indoors," says Alexandra. "This reduces dust entering the airways and encourages a natural grazing position." It also helps drain the sinuses.

9 Dampen hard feed: Even hard feed can create dust, and adding water will help to eliminate this.

10 Water dusty arena surfaces: Regular sprinkling with water will prevent your horse suffering during exercise.