

INFLAMMATORY AIRWAY DISEASE (IAD)



WHAT IS "INFLAMMATORY AIRWAY DISEASE"?

Inflammatory Airway Disease (IAD) is a condition where the **lower airways become inflamed**, leading to mucus build-up, reduced oxygen exchange and decreased performance. It is most commonly seen in performance horses and horses in regular work, particularly those exposed to **dust, pollen or smoke, or those with environmental sensitivities**. IAD is milder than severe equine asthma ("heaves") and often presents with subtle early signs, which can make it easy to miss in the early stages.

WHY SUMMER INCREASES RISK?

Across the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges, summer conditions can significantly increase airway irritation. **Dry paddocks** and **dusty arenas**, feeding **dry hay** or **chaff**, **windy conditions**, **pollen exposure** and even **bushfire smoke** all contribute to respiratory stress. On top of this, **increased respiratory effort** during exercise in warm weather places further strain on the airways. When these factors overlap, inflammation of the lower airways becomes much more likely.

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EARLY SIGNS TO WATCH FOR

IAD often develops gradually. Look for:

- Repeated coughing at the start of work
- Reduced stamina
- Slower warm-up
- Increased recovery time after exercise
- Mild clear or white nasal discharge
- Heavier breathing than expected
- Subtle drop in performance or willingness

These signs are often mistaken for fitness or training issues.



AT-HOME MONITORING

At home, you can monitor your horse using several practical observations:

- **Coughing Patterns** – Listen carefully for repeated coughing, especially during warm-up or exercise. Frequent coughs may indicate airway irritation or inflammation.
- **Recovery of Breathing** – Observe how quickly your horse's breathing returns to normal after work. Prolonged heavy breathing or increased effort can signal underlying airway disease.
- **Stamina and Forwardness** – Take note of changes in your horse's energy, willingness to move forward, or overall performance. Reduced stamina or reluctance to engage may be subtle signs of IAD.
- **Nasal Discharge** – Monitor for any new or persistent nasal discharge, which could indicate irritation, infection, or allergic responses.
- **Environmental Triggers** – Track patterns related to dust, hay type, wind, air quality (eg. smoke), or stable conditions. Horses with IAD often show symptoms after exposure to specific environmental triggers.
- **Consistent Documentation** – Keeping a daily log of these observations helps you and your veterinarian detect patterns early, allowing timely intervention and better management.

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HOW IAD IS DIAGNOSED?

If clinical signs persist, a veterinary assessment may be needed, including a comprehensive respiratory examination, endoscopy to visualize airway inflammation and mucus, and airway sampling such as a tracheal wash or bronchoalveolar lavage to evaluate inflammatory cells. The veterinarian will also consider environmental and management risk factors, and in some cases, additional testing may be performed to rule out other causes of poor performance. Together, these diagnostic tools help confirm whether IAD is present and guide a targeted management plan tailored to your horse's needs.

SUPPORTING YOUR HORSE THIS SUMMER

Environmental management makes a significant difference:



Water arenas to reduce dust



Improve airflow in stabling areas



- **Lightly dampen feed/hay**
- **Feed low-dust forage where possible**



- **Avoid harder work during smoke events**
- **Ride during cooler parts of the day**

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KEY TAKE-HOME POINTS

- **IAD is common in performance horses** – Often subtle at first but can affect long-term performance.
- **Summer increases airway irritants** – Dust, pollen, hay, and smoke can worsen symptoms.
- **Early signs are subtle** – Occasional coughing, slower recovery, or reduced forwardness.
- **Environmental control is essential** – Improve ventilation, reduce dust, soak hay, and avoid smoke.
- **Veterinary testing guides management** – Endoscopy and airway sampling help confirm IAD and tailor treatment.
- **Early intervention improves performance** – Prompt action keeps horses comfortable and performing at their best.

WHEN TO CONTACT YOUR VET

You should assess your horse if it coughs consistently during work, as repeated coughing can indicate airway irritation or inflammation. Pay attention to any unexplained reduced stamina, since a drop in energy or forwardness may signal underlying respiratory issues. Horses that are slow to recover after exercise, showing prolonged heavy breathing or effort, may have compromised airway function. Ongoing nasal discharge can point to irritation, infection, or allergic responses. Finally, horses with known airway sensitivity are at higher risk of IAD flare-ups and should be monitored more closely.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact us on 0412 619 740.

CASE EXAMPLE

This gelding had ongoing issues with coughing. After examination, a bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL) was performed (sample pictured). Results showed an increased number of neutrophils, supporting a diagnosis of IAD. Following the start of medication combined with nebuliser therapy, his owners noticed a marked improvement.

