

Joint supplements

Over the past two decades, joint supplements have been increasingly used in an attempt to both treat and prevent joint injury and degeneration. There is now an extensive range of products available for use as a daily in feed supplement.

There is a lack of good evidence regarding their efficacy; that may be due in part to the large variations between the concentration, and quality, of the ingredients between products.

It appears that joint supplements may benefit some patients but not others.



How do they work?

The vast majority contain the substances chondroitin sulphate and/or glucosamine. These chemicals are primary building blocks used by the body to construct and repair joint cartilage and other tissues.

Theoretically, the ingestion of these substances increases the quantity available to the body for use in normal cartilage repair and after injury. Laboratory studies have shown that the substances, when taken by mouth, can get absorbed into the blood stream, but there is currently limited evidence that proves these products are then used directly by the body to repair damaged tissues.

Similarly, laboratory studies have shown both chondroitin and glucosamine to have anti-inflammatory properties; there is some evidence that this effect is seen in clinically affected cases of joint injury and degeneration, although the exact mechanism is relatively poorly understood. Whilst it seems logical that feeding joint supplements to unaffected horses would be beneficial, in an effort to prevent damage to cartilage during exercise, evidence that confirms the claim of promoting a “healthy joint environment” is lacking. Despite this, their use in young performance and competition horses is widespread, with anecdotal evidence supporting the beneficial claims.



**JOINT SUPPLEMENTS MAY BE USED
IN THE TREATMENT AND PREVENTION
OF OSTEOARTHRITIS**

KEY POINTS:

- discuss the use of joint supplements with your vet;
- anecdotally many horses improve on treatment;
- there is currently limited clinical evidence to support the use of joint supplements;
- feed the correct quantity for the recommended length of time;
- it usually takes a period of several weeks for any clinical effects to be seen;
- not all cases benefit from joint supplements so discuss alternative treatment options with your vet.

When to use:

- in the treatment of osteoarthritis to attempt to reduce lameness and inflammation and support joint repair;
- can be used in conjunction with other treatments for osteoarthritis;
- to promote a healthy joint environment and assist in the prevention of osteoarthritis in the unaffected horse.

Warnings / contra-indications

- Veterinary medicines undergo rigorous safety and efficacy testing before they can be licensed.
- Joint supplements however are classed as nutraceuticals and do not have to be tested and licensed.
- They are generally regarded as safe but studies into potential side effects are lacking.
- Do not feed several joint supplements together.



WHICH SUPPLEMENT TO CHOOSE?

The extensive range of variably priced products, along with widespread conflicting claims of superior efficacy between products, leaves many owners confused about which one to choose. Given that the ingredients can be acquired from a range of sources, it is possible that apparently cheap products may contain inferior quality ingredients, although the relationship between purity of constituents and their relative potency needs further investigation. Generally speaking, reputable brands should be used to ensure a good quality product containing the advertised concentration of supplement.

When choosing a joint supplement:

- select a good quality product that can be afforded long term, as there is little point in using the supplement for a month or two;
- discuss the goals of treatment with your veterinary surgeon and consider whether other treatment options can be used instead of, or in conjunction with supplements;
- aim to determine the optimum activity and exercise intensity for the particular animal to promote a prolonged and productive working life.



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