

Treating a common cause of lameness in horses

OSTEARTHITIS (OA) is one of the most common causes of lameness in horses. Progressive damage to the joint causes inflammation and pain, which has an impact on the horse's ability to perform.

What exactly is osteoarthritis?

It is a chronic condition involving progressive and irreversible damage to joints over time. Essentially, the joint is put under more strain than it can cope with, causing damage to the joint, including the cartilage and the associated bones and soft tissues. This leads to inflammation and pain usually resulting in lameness.

Which joints are most affected?

Any joint can be involved, but the disease typically affects the hocks, front fetlocks, upper knee joints and coffin joints in the front feet. Some joint damage is an inevitable part of ageing, but it becomes a greater issue when the clinical signs develop more rapidly and affect the horse's ability to do its job.

Are there different types or causes?

The simplest way to explain it is to split it into two types:

The first is caused by repetitive strain – wear and tear over time. The way the horse moves, and predisposing factors such as breed and conformation, will contribute to putting excessive strain on the joint. This type of OA is usually of gradual onset and may be difficult to spot in the early stages.

The second type is of more rapid onset and is associated with other injuries or damage to the joint, such as fractures, septic arthritis (inflammation caused by infection) or osteochondrosis, which is a developmental disease.

What are the signs to look out for?

The early signs may be subtle, such as a mild build-up of fluid (effusion) on the joint, some reluctance to work, stiffness or reduced performance, rather than obvious lameness. Lameness, excessive joint effusion and pain on flexion of the joint will become more obvious over time if nothing is done to slow the progression of the disease.

How is it diagnosed?

Spotting it early is important for the successful management of OA. Initially, the horse will be examined and then assessed in-hand and perhaps under saddle.

VETERINARY ADVICE

Ben Gaskell, of the Minster Equine Veterinary Practice, York, on how to look out for and treat equine joint disease



Further investigation to identify the specific region of pain may be carried out using nerve blocks. This involves injecting local anaesthetic around specific nerves or into joints to block out feeling. If this resolves the lameness, it is good evidence that this is the source of the pain

X-rays, scans or even arthroscopy – carried out using a keyhole camera – might be used to provide additional evidence and, hopefully, confirm a diagnosis. However, in the early stages there may be little seen on an x-ray, as any bone change will not yet be apparent.

How do we treat it?

There are two main goals in the treatment of OA. Firstly, to lessen the pain, which will in turn reduce

the lameness, and, secondly, to minimise the progression of joint deterioration. It's not possible to reverse the fundamental changes in the joint, so instead we try to reduce the speed with which it worsens, while trying to maintain the function of the horse.

Many treatment options are available, and your vet will consider a number of factors when selecting the best approach for your horse. Common therapies include the use of various anti-inflammatory medications given in feed, by injection or directly into the joint; however all treatment options require sensible management of the horse's workload in the short, medium and long term.



ABOVE: X-ray of fetlock arthritis shows the rough new bone on the front of the joint
LEFT: Fetlock joint effusion ("articular windgalls")



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