

Arthritis explained



It's one of the most common causes of lameness affecting many horses as they age. Vet Matthew Tong explains the latest on this debilitating disease

Arthritis affects the vast majority of horses as they age, but can be managed with vet treatment and good care



The condition

A disease that can strike any horse at any time, arthritis usually develops with age as wear and tear on the joints damages their structure, leading to inflammation and pain.

Often referred to as degenerative joint disease or osteoarthritis, arthritis largely targets the hock, knee, fetlock, coffin joint and pastern,



Arthritis is common in the pastern joint

and can occur for a number of reasons. These include poor conformation, repetitive strain, an underlying defect in the cartilage - such as OCD (osteocondrosis dissecans) - or an injury to the joint.

Arthritis leads to bony changes that can limit the joint's movement as the cartilage, which coats the ends of the bones within the joint and acts

as a shock absorber, thins or cracks, exposing the underlying bone.

The release of inflammatory enzymes and cells further damages the joint. However, if it's caught early, it is possible to halt the effects and regain normal, or at least functional, joint function.

Arthritis: the key facts

- ✓ Arthritis is one of the leading causes of lameness in the UK, and is believed to be responsible for 60% of all cases.
- ✓ Today's more sophisticated diagnostic tools include nuclear scintigraphy (better known as a bone scan) and MRI scans. During a bone scan, a radioactive substance is injected that 'binds' to areas of active bony change within a joint. These can then be picked up as hot spots by a scanner. An MRI scan - which can only be used on the horse's lower leg - can also be used to detect changes in the joint and its surrounding soft tissue.
- ✓ Riding too fast or hard over poor terrain - be it hard, soft or boggy - can increase the chances of joint trauma and, in turn, predispose the joint to arthritis. This is one of the reasons why it's vital to ride with care when the going's not so good.

Symptoms & diagnosis

In its early stages it's hard to differentiate arthritis from just 'a bit of stiffness'. Maybe your horse isn't as keen as he once was to canter on a particular rein? Maybe there's heat and swelling around one of his joints? Maybe he's showing signs of mild lameness? Maybe he's less willing to pick up one of his back legs for you or the farrier?

To reach a diagnosis, your vet may need to perform a flexion test, take an ultrasound scan or use nerve blocks in a bid to identify the affected joint. If a local anaesthetic is injected into the joint and any lameness immediately disappears, arthritis may well be to blame for your horse's unsoundness.

X-rays can be taken to look for bony changes within the joint, though these

changes may be hidden, which is why X-rays are often used in conjunction with other diagnostic tests.

An arthroscopy - when a camera is inserted into the joint - is much more invasive, but enables the vet to make a more precise diagnosis. This process also allows the vet to 'clean up' the joint if necessary by removing any excess cartilage and debris.



A flexion test helps highlight any joint pain

Prevention

The best way to prevent and manage arthritis is to ensure your horse's body is working as efficiently as it can.

Regular farrier visits to balance the feet and help prevent uneven loading on the joints, keeping your horse at his ideal weight, and a regular, sensible exercise plan will all go a long way to

helping your horse's joints work as nature intended. It's also a good idea to make sure your horse is always well warmed up before strenuous exercise, and well cooled down after, to help protect his joints from excess wear and tear.

A good quality joint supplement that boosts your horse's levels of



Regular balancing foot care helps reduce joint strain

glucosamine and chondroitin (both help to build healthy cartilage) is recommended, and your vet will be able to advise you as to which product to invest in. While many people reach for this kind of supplement only when stiffness becomes an issue, it may be more beneficial to give it long-term from a younger age, especially if your horse is conformationally challenged, for example if he's pigeon toed.

Treatment

Treatment is geared towards reducing inflammation and pain and helping to prevent further damage to the joint.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as bute, can be given to reduce pain and swelling. Medication such as this is usually limited to the short term, though bute can be given long term if, for example,

an elderly horse needs a small dose daily to counter the effects of chronic arthritis.

A low dose of steroid can also be injected into the joint to help reduce inflammation, and drugs may be used to help rebuild damaged cartilage and improve the quality of the fluid within the joint. New, biological treatments, whereby naturally-occurring cells and

growth factors are injected into the joint to reduce inflammation, are now becoming more widespread.

A drug developed to treat arthritis in low-motion joints, such as the pastern, has been developed. Called Tildren, its active ingredient switches off certain cells known to break down bone when arthritis strikes. Surgery can also be used to fuse two arthritic bones in a bid to reduce pain.

With thanks to vet Matthew Tong and the team at Fellowes Farm Equine Clinic in Cambridgeshire for their help with this feature. Part of the XLEquine Group, visit www.fellowesfarm.com



Riding too fast over poor terrain will put undue stress on his joints

CALL THE VET! If your horse shows signs of lameness, if there's heat or swelling in one or more joints, or you spot any unusual lumps or bumps around a joint, call your vet for advice. While arthritis is manageable in the long term with good care, your horse may need painkillers, anti-inflammatories and box rest in the short term. 📞