

Winter blues

Managing arthritis in older horses

by Dr Sarah Van Dyk, BVSc (Hons)
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Winter is well and truly upon us and these colder months can be particularly tough on our equine friends. One particular condition that all of us are familiar with is arthritis. It can affect us as well as our pets and the colder weather often exacerbates this condition.

In this article, Dr Sarah Van Dyke from WestVETS Animal Hospital and Equine Reproduction Centre gives an overview of how arthritis affects older horses, the signs they may show, diagnosis and treatment options.

What is arthritis?

Arthritis by definition is inflammation of the joint. There are several different types of arthritis that can affect the horse. The type we are all familiar with and the one that comes to mind when we mention 'arthritis' is osteoarthritis or degenerative joint disease. This is a progressive deterioration of the articular cartilage in the joint which is accompanied by changes in the soft tissue and bone of the joint.

The articular cartilage functions to provide a smooth surface for bones to move past each other within the joint and as a shock absorber between bones. Osteoarthritis often arises in older horses as chronic 'wear and tear'. For the purpose of this article, 'arthritis' refers to this type. Other types of arthritis include septic arthritis caused by infection in the joint, immune mediated poly arthritis caused by a defect in immune system function and non-septic inflammation of the joint caused by trauma.

Signs that your horse may be affected

Arthritis can affect horses of any age and breed and use. All horses are at risk of developing arthritis in varying degrees from mild to severe. Factors that may contribute to the development of arthritis include poor conformation, injury, regular work that involves high speed, sharp turns and quick stops, working on hard ground, exaggerated gaits and a long career of jumping.



Acting sooner rather than later can certainly improve your horse's well-being and long term prognosis

Signs that may indicate your horse has arthritis may include:

- Stiffness, particularly when starting to move off from a standstill, which improves as the horse warms up
- Lameness, uneven gait or shortened strides
- Mild soft swelling of the joints of the distal limbs or bony swelling in region of joints of the distal limb
- Reduced range of motion in joints
- Reluctance to perform to normal ability
- Change in personality or willingness to work
- Some horses may prefer not to lie down as frequently as it is painful to rise again

A definitive diagnosis of arthritis can be made by your veterinarian by assessment of history, clinical examination, diagnostic work up such as nerve or joint blocks and the use of imaging modalities such as x-rays.

What can be done to help care for your horse with arthritis?

Keeping your horse warm during the winter months is probably one of the most important management factors. A warm, well fitted rug helps to keep joints of the upper limb warm and comfortable. A snug, thick, well insulated rug is preferable to multiple thinner rugs or heavy weighted rugs which tend to be cumbersome and at greater risk of getting tangled around legs or in fences. Some horses may prefer to be out at night and stabling may not always be possible but this can be considered to keep your horse warm at night.

Light exercise is actually beneficial for the arthritic horse. This may include hand walking and occasionally very light trail riding depending on the degree of arthritis. If possible, a fairly level flat paddock is preferable to steep hilly paddocks to put the least possible strain on the joints. If your horse is stabled, soft bedding should be used, as standing for long periods on hard surfaces can exacerbate the pain from arthritis. Having your horse regularly trimmed or shod by a farrier is important to maintain a healthy and well balanced foot as improper hoof balance and overgrown feet can increase the strain on joints.

Prescription medications

There are various medications that may be prescribed by your veterinarian to assist in the symptomatic treatment of arthritis. One class of drugs is non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAID's) such as phenylbutazone commonly known as 'bute'. These drugs provide pain relief and reduce inflammation in the joints, however, they can have side effects particularly with long term use.



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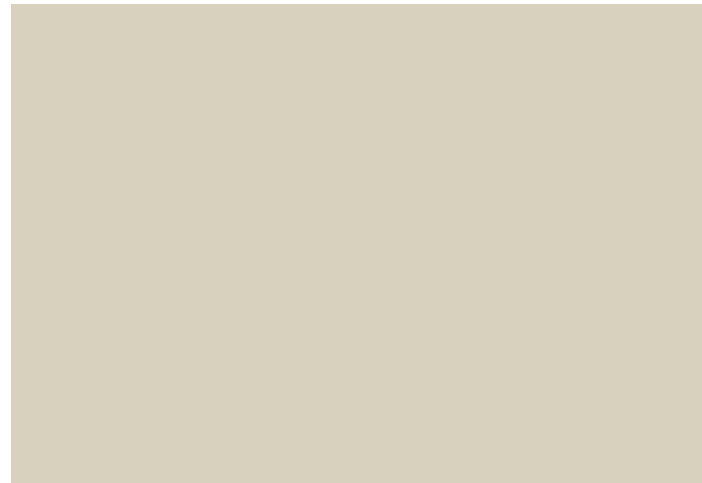
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An injectable intramuscular medication used regularly is pentosan polysulphate, which acts as an anti-inflammatory and protects articular cartilage. Another injectable medication is hyaluronic acid, which restores lubrication of the joint fluid, protects articular cartilage and has some anti-inflammatory effects.

Your vet may also advise intra-articular medication of affected joints with corticosteroids and hyaluronic acid. This directly reduces inflammation in the joint, restores lubrication of the joint fluid promoting cartilage health and assisting in reducing ongoing joint degradation.

Nutritional joint supplements

There are many nutritional joint supplements available on the market and although there is still a lack of good scientific research into how effective these supplements are in the prevention and treatment of arthritis, there is a lot of clinical evidence to support their use.

Supplements may help reduce inflammation, promote healthy cartilage and joint fluid and may slow the progression of arthritis. These products are often most useful to promote joint health in the performance horse before clinical signs of arthritis are present, however, they are often used in conjunction with other medications to treat signs of arthritis as well.

Many of these joint supplements contain all or some of the following ingredients. Glucosamine and chondroitin sulphate, which promote healthy cartilage, hyaluronic acid (HA), which is important for joint fluid, MSM which acts as a building block for cartilage, vitamin C and super oxide dismutase (SOD) which act as antioxidants and herbal products such as devil's claw and yucca.

There is a relatively new oral joint supplement product available from your veterinarian that contains epiitalis, a plant extract which has been shown to help regenerate damaged cartilage as well as reducing inflammation, protecting healthy cartilage in affected joints and minimising joint degradation.


If your horse is showing any of the signs mentioned earlier, it is worth considering the possibility of arthritis. Doing something about it earlier rather than later can certainly improve your horse's well-being and long term prognosis.

Although arthritis can cause significant discomfort for your horse, particularly in winter, careful management can help your beloved equine friend get through the winter months happy and comfortable.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sarah Van Dyk BVSc (Hons) - Mixed Animal Veterinarian. Sarah worked at WestVETS as an afterhours nurse in her last year of studies at UQ. Upon graduation in 2009, Sarah worked in Armidale, New South Wales in mixed practice for some time before re-joining the team at WestVETS as a mixed animal veterinarian. Her special interests are small animal surgery, farm animal medicine and surgery, and equine medicine and reproduction. She also enjoys being attending veterinarian at endurance rides and other equestrian events. In her spare time, she enjoys snowsports, art, horseriding and long distance running.



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