



*At Last.....
Something really new
in horse grooming!*

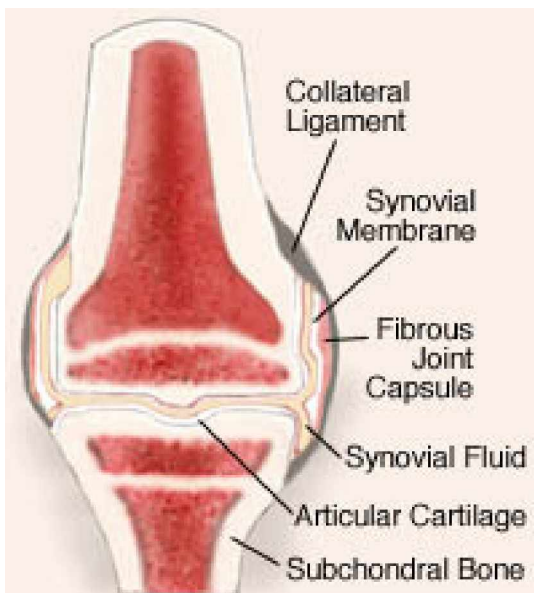


Horses And Arthritis....Facts & Treatments

This article reviews the definition of arthritis, the signs and symptoms and then looks at the treatment of the disease particularly in the older horse offering you tips and guidelines to help you manage your horse.

Most of us know about arthritis, some of us even suffer from it and in general it's a disease of the aging body. Of course here we are talking about osteoarthritis rather than the more serious and damaging rheumatoid arthritis which can happen at any age and is caused by many factors including immunological factors.

Osteoarthritis (from now on referred to as 'arthritis') is a degenerative disease of the joints due to factors such as wear & tear or trauma. It is generally seen as a disease of 'older age' and it leads to erosion and thinning of the articular cartilage, the tissue covering on the end of joints, leading to pain and reduction of joint function.



On the left is a diagram of a joint showing how it is encased in a 'capsule'. The risk of arthritis increases in your horse with every passing year and that risk can increase dependant upon the life he has led too. If his life has been very physically demanding then the disease is likely to set in earlier. There is a definite change in horses around the age of 15 which sees an escalation of cell death within bone, cartilage and fibrous tissue. Elasticity and the ability to stretch decreases as does the ability of cartilage to absorb shock due to its thinning over time.

Illus courtesy of www.manepoints.com

Arthritis onset can be quite sudden in horses as their weight bearing joints get very little relief and are subject to constant pressure. Indeed parts of the weight bearing cartilage can break off and irritate nearby muscles. Constant wear results in the bone surfaces grinding on each other with the complete loss of cartilage but fortunately cartilage can 'stabilise' itself to some extent if some protection is be offered to the joint and the wear and tear factor reduced.

It's certainly best to look for and discover the disease early in your horse since treatment is much more effective in the early stages. Karen Hayes in her article '*Arthritis in Horses*' suggests that there are 2 types of horse arthritis. The first, a less obvious kind and the second, a very obvious kind.

The latter is obvious since the joint has been traumatised or perhaps infected and is sore enough to cause lameness. You call the vet. In the second type the obvious signs are absent and there may just be a little joint puffiness which is easy to miss, meanwhile the arthritic process marches on!!

Things to watch for:

- Ü Slight puffiness in lower leg joints
- Ü Stiff and awkward gait at start improving as the horse warms up.
- Ü A reluctance to perform movements that used to be done with ease.
- Ü Grating sound when the joint is used
- Ü Bumps & swellings on joint extremities
- Ü Stiffness after sleep or prolonged standing.

So what do you look for?

- Ü Inspect the joints every day – feel them after mild exercise and check for any peaks and valleys in the joints. The peaks represent bones and the valleys soft tissue areas that can be filled with fluid which you can feel. Check each joint against another to see if they are symmetrical. If you have a young horse, compare the joints of your older horse with these young horse joints.
- Ü Check for soundness by gently feeling the joint and probing gently. If you find tenderness, your horse flinches, swishes his tail or shows other pain reflexes it's time to call in the vet.
- Ü If there's no sign of tenderness, sigh with relief! You can start some home treatment as outlined below

- a) Confine the horse in a small paddock or even a stall for a day. Keep him relaxed and ice the affected joint. Soft, reusable chiller packs work well wrapped in a towel. Hold the pack on for 5-6 minutes and then remove for 10 minutes and repeat 2-4 times. You can then apply a bandage to reduce further swelling.
- b) Remove the bandage and hand walk your horse twice a day for 10-15 minutes. Rewrap the joint and keep him confined for a further half a day.
- c) During that period take him for 2 periods of about 15 minutes of hand walking or other gentle exercise depending on how he's progressing and responding to treatment. If the swelling, tenderness or pain returns then you're overdoing things.
- d) Follow up the exercise with an inspection and if he's free of the original symptoms then you can return him to the paddock. If he isn't, best call the vet.

What steps can a horse lover take to help delay or alleviate arthritis?

It's important to be proactive and there's a whole armoury of things that can help your horse battle arthritis

Take him 'out of retirement'. Regular exercise will help if it's tailored to your horse's condition. It increases circulation, tones the muscles and it's a fact that a fit horse has thicker and healthier cartilage covering his joints.

Do this in stages and start gently. Living in the pasture is ideal as the horse has evolved to step and graze, but turning out to the paddock will also help. Anything is better than a stall since just the movement of walking helps the joint fluid circulation as the joint cartilage is compressed and released.

Keep his diet appropriate since there are supplements proven to help arthritis but it's worth checking with your vet first. We have a 'round up of medications etc available at the end of this article.

Work his affected joints in a passive manner by gently picking up, bending and straightening them. These passive movements are well documented as encouraging healing in inflamed joints.

Always make a habit of doing stretching exercises with your horse along with a good warm up before exercising him. This of course increases blood flow and warms up and softens muscles and ligaments.

Use medication wisely and safely to keep your horse pain free. There are many options and combinations of both conventional and alternative therapies you can use.

These treatments are taken from Equus magazine plus other sources and are meant as 'information only'. A vet should be consulted before the use of any medicine:

Anti inflammatory medications. There are many and their principal action is to decrease the swelling, inflammation and hence the pain of arthritis.

Injections of hyaluran into the joints can help by improving the quality of the synovial fluid that surrounds and lubricates it. Systemic injections of this substance or polysuphated glycosaminoglycans may stimulate joint fluid quality.

An injection of a steroid into the joint brings a halt to inflammation but whilst short acting steroids are fairly safe, long term usage has associated problems. Cutting edge treatments include the use of proteins known as interleukin receptor antagonists that can stop joint degeneration as well as the use of growth factors to stimulate cartilage regeneration

Nutritional supplements. Examples are chondroitin sulphate and glucosamine and they are now proved to help in cartilage protection and repair. As supplements they can help prevent and/or treat arthritis.

Alternative therapies (...and there are many), include for instance the use of herbs, bee venom therapy, devils claw herb blend and other herbs such as bog bean, celery seed, dandelion root, white willow and yarrow , methylsulfonylmethane etc.

There are plenty of information sources available for you to research more thoroughly and build up your own knowledge of this disease and its treatment.

We age, our horses age too and arthritis is common to us both but with some real attention and care for our favourite animals, we can make the discomfort of arthritis much easier to live with.

H-10 June 2006 and adapted from several sources. Major sources are named.