

OSTEOARTHRITIS IN HORSES

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Osteoarthritis is a term used to describe degenerative changes to the articular cartilage and subchondral bone in the joint. Articular cartilage is a collagen rich layer that covers the bones of joints. This cartilage ensures that the weight experienced by the joint during motion is distributed evenly, and that there is not friction as the bones slide across each other. In osteoarthritis there is damage to this layer and the adjacent bone causing uneven load distribution within the joint and poor motion. This damage may be an age related change, associated with heavy use or secondary to a traumatic injury.

Osteoarthritis may occur in any joint and is a common source of lameness in horses. Some joints tend to be more frequently affected.

Hocks are very commonly affected. The fetlock, pastern, carpus (knee) and neck may also be involved.

The joints implicated usually reflect the horse's job. Horses that are used for western disciplines often have changes to their hocks. Jumpers or dressage horses may have changes in their necks. Osteoarthritis can occur in any joint however, and a thorough lameness examination should always be conducted to determine the initiating site of lameness.

Diagnosis of osteoarthritis cannot be deter-



A thorough physical examination by a veterinarian with radiographs or other imaging diagnostics should be considered for a complete diagnosis of osteoarthritis

mined from the physical examination alone, though clinical signs of pain on joint flexion, decreased joint motion and joint swelling may be strong indicators of the disease process. Once the site of lameness is determined, radiographs may be the best option for initial investigation. Joints affected by osteoarthritis may show narrowing of the joint space or extra bone production on radiographs, as the joint attempts to stabilize. It is important to note however that the radi-

ographic changes of osteoarthritis lag behind the clinical disease and therefore changes may not be seen initially on radiographs. If this is the case, other imaging options such as nuclear scintigraphy, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and ultrasound should be considered for a complete diagnosis.

Osteoarthritis cannot be cured, only managed. The management options for osteoarthritis depend on the stage of disease. Some horses may be able to be maintained



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on routine medications either orally or via injection, others may require intra-articular medications directly into the joint. There are many medications

available both over the counter and from your veterinarian for the management of osteoarthritis. It is important to discuss such options with your veterinarian and determine a treatment plan that fits your horse and their intended use. Do not treat based on clinical signs alone without consulting your veterinarian as there are many serious joint injuries that may present similarly to osteoarthritis, which need to be ruled out.

As osteoarthritis can only be managed, prognosis is largely dependant on response to therapies and the speed of disease progression. The earlier the changes are identified, the easier it is to slow down the arthritic process. Many horses that are in the early stage of disease are able to be ridden regularly and compete in their chosen discipline. Horses in the latter stages of disease may not be as responsive to medications and may only be used for light riding or as a companion animal.

Osteoarthritis is a very common cause of lameness in the horse. If your horse develops lameness or has reduced athletic performance, it is important to consult your veterinarian as soon as possible. The sooner osteoarthritis is diagnosed and managed, the greater the chance for a successful outcome.



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