

Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic (2002) Ltd



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Arthritis in Horses

Arthritis is a common condition in people as well as horses. Approximately 60% of all lameness problems in horses are related to arthritis.

In a healthy joint, bone is covered by a thin layer of cartilage. The cartilage is then covered by a synovial membrane and synovial fluid is the liquid within the joint itself. As a horse moves the weight of its body compresses the joint. The cartilage absorbs this shock by changing shape and redistributing the force. The synovial fluid within the joint helps to lubricate the joint and decrease friction.

Over time injuries, as well as regular wear and tear on the joint, results in damage to the cartilage. The body responds by trying to clean up any debris and damaged cartilage. Unfortunately, this cleanup process changes the composition of the synovial fluid and it turns into a more watery liquid with less lubricating ability. This cycle continues and eventually the cartilage breaks down so much that bone begins to rub on bone. Bone responds to increased force by producing more bone and therefore extra bony spurs are created. In severe cases, and depending on the size and movement of the joint, the two bones of a joint may eventually fuse together.

A horse's response to joint pain is to decrease the amount of weight that it puts on that joint, which is portrayed as lameness. Other signs of arthritis in the horse are swelling and decreased range of motion of the affected joint.

Unfortunately, we are unable to repair cartilage once it is damaged. Therefore treatment is aimed at managing pain and slowing the progression of arthritis rather than fixing the disease.

Fortunately, there are several treatment options available to manage arthritis.

Regular exercise (and/or pasture turnout) improves joint mobility and improves joint fluid circulation. Exercise also strengthens and conditions the muscles that support the joint.

Over conditioned horses with arthritis will benefit from weight loss since it dramatically decreases the strain on the joint.

A number of prescription products are available for treating arthritis. These include NSAIDS (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), such as Bute. Other veterinary administered products include Legend (sodium hyaluronate), administered intravenously, which helps lubricate the joint and Adequan (polysulfated glycosaminoglycan), administered intramuscularly, which helps protect the cartilage. Injecting a joint with a corticosteroid (a potent anti-inflammatory agent) may also be used to treat an arthritic joint. Legend is also commonly combined with the corticosteroid to improve the effect of the joint injection.

A group of products known as nutraceuticals, which are added to your horse's feed, may be beneficial in reducing pain and increasing joint mobility. These include glucosamine and chondroitin sulphate. These products have anti-inflammatory and cartilage protective properties.

An alternative therapy for arthritis is acupuncture. Acupuncture stimulates specific anatomic points in the body to relieve pain. It is very effective in relieving muscle spasms and causes the release of endorphins (natural pain killers) in the brain. If it is used in conjunction with other medications, it can allow a reduction in required medication dose to keep an animal comfortable.

Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic now also offers laser therapy, an exciting new tool we can use to treat arthritis. Laser therapy stimulates cells to promote healing which relieves pain and inflammation.

In specific cases surgery is used to remove bone fragments or defects contributing to the development of arthritis. Lastly, surgically fusing a severely arthritic joint may provide pain relief for some horses.

If you think your horse has arthritis, or you have any questions about arthritis and treatment options, feel free to contact the veterinarians at the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic.