

Factsheet: Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is a common disease in horses of all ages, it can affect young horses as well as old, although it is estimated the incidence of osteoarthritis is greater than 50% in horses >15 years and over 80% horses >30 years of age. It is also estimated that 60% of all lameness problems are related to osteoarthritis. Osteoarthritis is caused by damage to joints whether this be through a significant injury or general wear and tear throughout the horse's life. Physical and inflammatory damage to the cartilage of the joint takes place and the cartilage is degraded away. When the subchondral bone beneath the cartilage becomes exposed it can lead to an incredible amount of pain and results in lameness.

Clinical signs

Lameness of one or more limbs

- Stiff or altered gait
- Reluctance to exercise
- Difficulty grazing
- Tripping over or struggling to get up
- Joint swelling

Diagnosis

- Radiographs are the most common way to diagnose osteoarthritis. If enough cartilage degradation has taken place and bone formation starts to happen in and around the joint, then this can be seen radiographically.
- More subtle cartilage damage needs advanced imaging such as CT or MRI to detect cartilage changes, but this cannot detect the start of the disease process.

Treatment

Unfortunately, there is currently no treatment for osteoarthritis in horses, humans or any other species. It is a disease that needs to be managed, often through daily pain medication such as phenylbutazone, depending on the severity of osteoarthritis the horse has. If one joint is particularly affected by osteoarthritis, then injections of corticosteroids can help reduce inflammation in the joint but the time this lasts for is very variable. Other factors can also be considered to help ease daily discomfort such as controlled exercise, good farriery and foot care, providing extra warmth to older horses during the winter through stabling overnight or rugs and lifting feed bowls can help some horses with neck osteoarthritis. It is very important to consider the quality of life of horses living with osteoarthritis and often when the disease has progressed to the advanced stages euthanasia is the kindest option.

We'd really value your support

Communities For Hoses works tirelessly to improve the welfare of horses through working closely with their owners to educate and support them.

We believe that prevention is better than cure and that through education we can achieve better outcomes for horses and their owners.

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- Cover veterinary bills
- Buy equipment
- Cover petrol and transport costs
- Pay our welfare officer
- Run our education programmes

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