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Arthritis Treatment and Prevention

Is your horse or pony stiff, reluctant to move forwards or limping, especially on cold mornings and after a hard days work? Arthritis, or degenerative joint disease, occurs in all species and horses and ponies are no exception. Causes vary and include

- Joint problems such a OCD that large breed horses can develop and can cause joint degeneration as the horse ages if not treated as a young horse
- Joint damage or trauma/injury
- Heavy work – high level dressage, show jumping, eventing or other athletic pursuits
- Previous history of heavy work such as an ex racehorse
- Simply just getting old!

Signs of arthritis in horses vary depending on the joint affected and include reluctance to move forwards, dragging th hind feet, limping or lameness, joint pain or swelling and are usually worse during cold weather.

Your vet will be able to diagnose joint problems during a routine check up and clinical exam, by watching the horse walk and trot, performing flexion tests (bending the joints up and making the horse trot out afterwards to look for a worsening lameness), and feeling for joint thickening or increased joint fluid. However, they may also recommend x-rays to check for any bony changes within the joints and also the severity of change and number of joints involved.

Arthritis initially starts as joint cartilage damage. There is articular (joint) cartilage lining the ends of each bone within the joint. Once the cartilage is eroded away and there is bone on bone contact you will also get changes such as increased poor quality or reduced quantity of joint fluid, and new growth of abnormal bone.

Treatment of arthritis can include a change to the horses exercise regime and type, pain relief/anti-inflammatory medications such as bute or meloxicam, and in severe cases with only a few joints involved, intra articular (into the joint) injections of cortisone and hyaluronic acid (replacement joint fluid).

As with anything, prevention is better than cure. The most proven arthritis preventative and effective treatment for early stage disease is Pentosan. Pentosan polysulfate helps to improve the quality of joint fluid, rebuild damaged cartilage and reduce the chance of new bone forming. Pentosan is given as an injection into the muscle once weekly for 4-8 weeks and then ongoing depending on the severity of the condition. Pentosan is available from your vet, and now comes as a handy “Arthropac”, a pack of 4 vials of pentosan, plus directions on how to administer, alcohol swabs and needles and syringes.

Keeping your horses joints healthy and pain free should give you years of happy riding!

If you have any questions or would like to book an appointment with a vet, please call 9739 5244.