

JOINT DISEASE - CAN YOU HELP?

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Horses today are used differently than they were 100 years ago and are living longer. Just as with people, arthritis and joint disease are common and can reduce the useful life of your favorite show or trail horse and result in pain and suffering for your horse. Conformation, genetics, how you use and care for your horse and diseases such as Lyme can all cause problems in your horse's joints at some point in his life. Normal, healthy joints deal with concussion and force through joint fluid and cartilage that protects the bone ends. A normal, healthy joint deals with minor injuries by repairing itself and this process usually goes unrecognized. However, when this process is overwhelmed, inflammation causes destruction of the normal joint fluid and cartilage and heat, swelling, pain and obvious lameness result. Unfortunately, by the time these symptoms become apparent, there has usually already been quite a bit of damage done and this may be irreversible. Are there things we can use to treat or more importantly prevent joint disease?

The first step is to have a thorough veterinary evaluation to pinpoint the extent and location of the problem. If there is an obvious cause, there should be some modification in the housing, nutrition and exercise program of the affected horse to halt or at least slow down the damage. Your veterinarian can then offer you joint injections of corticosteroids, or hyaluronic acid or other drugs to help with the immediate inflammation. Two of the common injectables are Legend and Adequan. Both of these can help reverse some of the joint damage but can be expensive if used regularly. If you do any reading at all, you have probably seen advertisements for joint protectants that can be taken orally. These are usually very affordable. Do these supplements work, how do they work and can they be used proactively to keep joints healthy? In this article, we will answer some of these questions.

The goal of most supplements is to provide some nutritional components that may be inadequate or missing from the diet that can provide substances that help in joint repair and rebuilding. Common ingredients include chondroitin sulfate, glucosamine, yucca, vitamin C, MSM, minerals such as magnesium, and cetyl myristoleate. Most of these products take time to work – in some cases several weeks. Usually, they recommend a “loading” dose which can be two times the maintenance dose after results are seen. Keep in mind that if one particular product does not seem effective, another may be tried. Ingredients vary along with the horse's response. It is worthwhile to try several formulations before giving up on these supplements. Having said that, not all joint supplements are equal. A large number of supplements on the market contained very little (and some none at all) of the ingredients listed on the label when analyzed by a consumer group. Supplements are not regulated by the FDA and you have to

rely on the manufacturer to actually put the proper ingredients into the product. Look for the National Animal Supplement Council stamp on the supplement you are buying. The NASC is an organization which oversees manufacturers to ensure that a product is what it says it is. Membership is voluntary but supplements carrying this “seal of approval” can be relied on to actually contain the things they claim. In general, oral joint supplements can help relieve some of the pain and inflammation associated with joint disease and arthritis. It is good to remember that you generally get what you pay for. Products like Cosequin and Cetyl M are more expensive but often may be more effective. Try several different products before giving up on joint supplements. Sometimes a dosage increase or change to a different active ingredient will be the ticket to good joint function.

How can we help prevent problems from developing in the first place? Can we use these joint products to keep joints healthy in our horses?

1. Good nutrition especially in young horses can help bones and joints develop normally. Adequate protein and energy for normal (not fast) growth along with balanced amounts of minerals and vitamins are essential.
2. Plenty of natural exercise in large pastures with other horses help develop strong bones and joints.
3. Keep feet trimmed and properly shod to prevent unnatural stress on joints. Don't try to “overcorrect” conformation problems especially in older horses.
4. Don't ride horses too young.
5. Proper conditioning to avoid muscle fatigue and joint stress. Making your horse a “weekend” athlete invites injuries. Avoid riding when footing is poor such as ice, deep mud or other conditions that may invite injuries.
6. Address lameness issues early. If heat or swelling of a joint or leg occurs, rest the horse and call in your veterinarian for an examination
7. Don't breed horses with lameness issues that are related to conformation problems.
8. Joint supplements may be used preventively in young horses starting training. Many of these help keep joint fluid and cartilage healthy and can mean a long and useful career for your horse.
9. Regular exercise will keep the muscles that support the joints strong and is the best thing for bad joints themselves. However, the type and extent of the exercise should be considered. Your veterinarian or alternative practitioner can help set up a good set of exercises to help your horse if he is already having joint problems.
10. Use of antiinflammatories such Bute or some of the newer drugs can help keep your affected horse comfortable when used as needed. Your veterinarian can help you select a drug and a dose that will minimize the side effects that may occur.

There are literally pages of supplements available in any catalog or on the internet. Let your veterinarian help you choose one that can help your horse return to or stay in top form.