

# Geriatric Horse Care: Osteoarthritis

Alex Bianco, MS, DVM

Osteoarthritis is an inflammatory condition that can affect one or more joints and causes progressive and irreversible deterioration of the articular cartilage with concurrent changes to the bone and soft tissue. As an inflammatory process, the primary manifestation of OA in your horse will be joint pain and swelling. The cause of OA in a given joint is likely due to a combination of factors such as athletic history, trauma, conformation, and genetic predisposition. While the natural proclivities of horses allow them to excel in a variety of disciplines, they also subject them to repetitive stress or trauma to their joints that can ultimately result in OA.



Many horses are diagnosed with lameness due to OA early in life, but virtually all geriatric horses will have OA in at least one joint due to the progressive nature of the disease and the increased lifespan of the modern horse. In 2011, a survey of horse owners in the United Kingdom found that 72% of horses  $\geq 15$  years old had osteoarthritis.

The goal for a horse with osteoarthritis is not to cure the condition but to develop a treatment plan aimed at giving the horse living with OA a high quality of life. This plan involves pain management, exercise, a safe environment, and proper supplementation.

## **Monitor pain**

How your horse manifests pain will depend on the location and severity of the OA along with your horse's individual pain tolerance. Ask your veterinarian to help you develop a method to assess your horse's comfort level. Your horse may seem to have good and bad days. Try to monitor what seems to make your horse more or less comfortable, such as changes in the weather or a certain activity.

## **Keep your horse active and healthy**

Many geriatric horses with OA can still be ridden and typically do best with a consistent activity level. Sudden changes in activity level, whether increased or decreased, can aggravate the osteoarthritis. Make any changes in your exercise routine gradually and monitor your horse for any change in pain level.

Obesity is one of the biggest detriments to the management of joint pain. Horses with OA should be kept at a body condition score of 4 or 5 out of 9 to decrease the load on each joint. Your veterinarian or nutrition professional can help you assess your horse's body condition and develop a nutrition plan.

## **Provide a safe environment**

In general, uneven surfaces can make your horse's pain worse. Avoid using concrete in locations where your horse will be standing for long periods of time. Your veterinarian or farrier may recommend special orthopedic shoeing depending on your horse's condition. Provide a safe environment for lying down and sleeping. Horses must lie down to have a restful sleep and horses with OA may refuse to lie down because it is harder for them to stand

up quickly. In the pasture, horses are reluctant to lie down if they do not have another horse "standing guard," so ensure your geriatric horse has at least one companion.

### **Will supplements help?**

There are many supplements that claim to help with osteoarthritis. However, there is no governmental regulation of these products, very few have been scientifically proven to work and many do not contain the ingredients they claim.

Supplements used to manage OA include:

Glucosamine and chondroitin: These ingredients have been shown to help in management of OA in horses.

Omega-3 fatty acids: Natural anti-inflammatories that can be found in products such as flaxseed or fish oil.

Consult with your veterinarian or nutrition professional on specific supplements before adding them to your horse's diet.

### **NSAIDs**

Caution: All NSAIDs can have serious side effects when used at high or prolonged doses. Please consult with your veterinarian on the appropriate use of NSAIDs.

While the management techniques listed above should be considered the backbone of OA management, successful management of OA requires a working partnership with your veterinarian. Veterinarians can offer targeted local therapies such as joint injections or surgery and may recommend treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

During an acute "flare up" of OA pain, a short course (3-5 days) of NSAIDs at a prescribed dose is appropriate and should be safe. Because it is considered safer than other NSAIDs, daily use of firocoxib is becoming increasingly common. However, firocoxib can still cause side effects such as gastric or colonic ulcers and kidney failure. Daily NSAID use should only be used in horses that have a poor quality of life despite addressing all other aspects of OA management. Remember to consult with your veterinarian about proper use of NSAIDs.

### **References**

Ireland et al. Factors associated with mortality of geriatric horses in the United Kingdom. *Prev Vet Med* 101 (2011) 204– 218

*Author: Alex Bianco, MS, DVM, University of Minnesota. Photo Credit: Krishona Martinson, PhD, University of Minnesota*

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