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7 KEYS TO PROTECTING YOUR HORSE'S JOINTS

By Christine Barakat with Melinda Freckleton, DVM

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Exercise and competition can be hard on your horse's legs. But there are things you can do to reduce the risk of wear and tear injuries and keep his joints healthy.

Any horse who enjoys a long and active life is probably going to develop some degree of arthritis eventually. In fact, it's a rare horse over the age of 2 who doesn't have at least a touch of the degenerative joint disease, which is characterized by the breakdown of articular cartilage at the end of long bones.





In addition, arthritis can occur in a horse of any age after injury to joint structures, cartilage and/or stabilizing tissues, such as tendons and ligaments.

What is somewhat preventable, however, is early onset arthritis in younger animals, which can result from chronic overuse. If the minute injuries to the cartilage or other joint structures that result from exertion are not given sufficient time to heal, a destructive cycle can begin.

Inflammatory enzymes sent to repair cartilage defects also break down the synovial fluid, making it thinner and less protective. At the same time, collagen and proteoglycans are lost, reducing the cartilage's ability to stay hydrated and flexible. And if the horse continues to work as his joint

is attempting to repair itself, more damage occurs.

Here are some steps you can take to prevent these destructive processes from damaging your horse's joints.

1 ■ Don't overtrain. If your horse is jumping well or nailing his sliding stops, continuing to drill him may lead to arthritis, not to mention mental burnout. The horseman's adage that "there are only so many jumps in a horse" isn't superstition, it's a physiological reality. If you find yourself needing more practice than your horse does, look into taking lessons with a qualified trainer on a borrowed horse. This will minimize the work you do with any one animal but allow you to get in the repetitions you need.

2 ■ Schedule "easy" days for hardworking horses. Any horse on a rigorous competition or work schedule needs downtime to allow his body to heal. Exact planning of days off will depend on his level of fitness and your schedule, but as a rule of thumb, never work a horse hard more than three days in a row without throwing in an easy trail ride or just a day to wander a large paddock on his own. (Note: Confining a horse to his stall on his day off may actually lead to stiffness in his joints.)

3 ■ Ask your veterinarian about supplements and other products that can alleviate routine aches and pains. Your veterinarian will have real-world experience in which



products may be most beneficial for your horse given his age, activity level and circumstances. Consider options for combating inflammation and reducing soreness.

Many products on the market are designed to combat inflammation and reduce soreness and your veterinarian can advise you about which liniments, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications and/or feed supplements may work best in alleviating inflammation and promoting soundness.

4. ■ Protect joints from potential traumas. Obviously you won't be able to prevent all acute injuries to joints—horses are always thinking up new ways to hurt themselves—but do take steps to minimize any risks you can anticipate. For instance, a horse who aggressively paws his stall door at feeding time could rap a knee or fetlock hard enough to cause inflammation.

Rearrange your schedule so you can deliver feed to his bucket when he's still turned out, or open the door and let him paw under a stall guard to protect his joints.

5. ■ Take any skin wound near a joint very seriously. Wound infections that extend into joint spaces can aggressively eat away at cartilage, leaving a horse in arthritic pain so crippling that euthanasia is the only humane solution. If your horse has a skin wound over or near a joint, call your veterinarian for advice. He or she may decide the safest bet is a farm call to investigate the depth of the defect and a prescription for a course of antibiotics to prevent infection. Small puncture wounds, in particular, need to be examined. The skin defect on the surface can heal quickly, lulling you into thinking everything is fine as infection develops unseen.

6. ■ Keep your horse's hooves trimmed and balanced.

Use the best farrier you can find and have him out regularly to tend to your horse's feet. Maintaining feet at the proper angles and length will keep a horse moving optimally, reducing joint strain and inflammation.

7. ■ Maintain appropriate footing.

A surface that makes a horse work too hard or subjects his legs to excessive concussive forces puts him at greater risk of strain or injury. Even for light casual rides, try to stick to footing that isn't excessively firm or too deep.

If you're not sure about your arena surface, ask your trainer or veterinarian for advice. For more serious training, one of the high-tech footing options now available would be a good investment. 🐾