

# Q & A

## DJD damage

**Q** My 14-year-old cob has DJD – arthritis – in his hocks. What's the prognosis and will supplements be beneficial?

**Deidre Carson answers:**

Arthritis (joint inflammation) is a complex condition and there are many structures that can be involved and many degrees of severity. The term is most commonly used to describe the presence of degenerative joint disease (DJD).

In its mildest form, the soft tissues of the joint can become inflamed in response to excessive exercise, or some twisting or wrenching injury. If caught early enough and treated, this inflammation will respond to anti-inflammatory treatment such as cold, rest and systemic medication like phenylbutazone (bute), flunixin or meloxicam.

### Diagnosis

If the trauma is repetitive or severe, or simply as a result of general wear and tear, the cartilage surface within the joint and the adjacent bone ends will become involved. Damaged cartilage tends to become thinner and less shock absorbing.

The bone at the margin of the joint responds by producing more bone in an irregular manner and this encroaches on the joint. The surrounding tissues also become thicker – what most people call 'arthritis'. There is loss of normal motion in the joint and a variable degree of pain associated with these changes.

Arthritis is usually diagnosed on the basis of clinical signs and radiographs. The hock is a very complex structure with several joints and the degree of lameness does not always correspond well to the severity of changes seen on X-rays. In many of these cases, it is necessary to perform nerve blocks to confirm the presence of active arthritis in the joint(s).

### Treatment options

Treatment options depend on the joint(s) affected, the severity and duration of lameness and the use of the horse. Many cases will receive medication into

the joint while others are managed by oral or intravenous medication. A small number may undergo surgery to try to fuse the affected joint(s) in an attempt to remove the source of pain, but there is no guaranteed 'quick fix'.

Oral supplements might help in some cases, but there is little scientific evidence to be sure of their efficacy. That said, a combined supplement containing chondroitin and glucosamine, with or without MSM, may be given daily in an attempt to restore normal joint fluid, improve cartilage health and reduce pain. The main problem is that it is not possible to 'undo' the degenerative changes.

**Surgery may help, supplements too, but there's no 'quick fix'**



Photo: Bob Langrish

## At full stretch...

**Q** Please can you tell me how to do a carrot stretch correctly – and how will it help my horse?

**Gudrun Wallis answers:**

Stretching your horse's muscles with the help of carrots or treats can help to restore and increase flexibility through the neck and back. Stretching can also help to alleviate muscle spasm, which in turn will restore normal blood flow to the tissue, making it less prone to injury and having a positive effect on the muscles' warm-up time.

Horses' backs are horizontally loaded due to the weight of the rider. This actuality – and mishaps such as getting cast or exuberant behaviour – can have an impact on the normal up and down and left to right function of the joints between the horse's vertebrae. Suppling exercises can help to regain normal joint range of motion and can strengthen certain muscle groups needed to work in a correct outline.



**Suppling exercises can strengthen muscles needed to work in a correct outline**

Photo: Bob Atkins

### Try these...

The following stretching exercises must be done correctly to gain maximum benefit, and the horse must be kept comfortable and relaxed at all times. A level, non-slip surface provides a safe area for you and your horse.

➤ The first stretch encourages side flexion through the neck. With the help of a treat, guide the horse's head around to his side, so that it is level with his shoulder. Both the horse's ears should point upwards and be level with each other, as tilting the head will avoid flexion of the upper neck vertebrae.

➤ The treat can then be brought further back towards the horse's back and pelvis. This encourages flexion through the back as well as the neck. A certain amount of head tilting will be necessary with this exercise. With elderly or particularly stiff horses, you

can stand next to the horse's shoulder and let him bend around you, as this makes the exercise a little easier.

➤ Taking the treat between the horse's front legs will encourage stretching of the neck downwards and lifting of the back. The lower towards the ground the carrot is positioned, the more effective the stretch will be – although you may want to introduce the exercise at knee height.

➤ Belly lift exercises can be very valuable for relaxing the back muscles and building up abdominal muscles that support the rider's weight. The handler stands next to the horse, placing his fingertips on the midline of the horse's abdomen. Start with a light touch and increase pressure until the horse's back rises. Particular care must be taken here as some horses are ticklish and may try to kick at your hands.

### Top tips

- When doing stretches with your horse, repeat them all a couple of times in both directions where applicable and perform them up to four times a week.
- Positioning the horse parallel to a wall will help to stop him from cheating, by swinging his back end around to get hold of the treat.

Stretching your horse's muscles with the help of carrots or treats can help to restore and increase flexibility

## Say aaaahh...

**Q** Do horses have tonsils and can they get tonsillitis?

**Deidre Carson answers:**

Human tonsils are collections of lymphoid tissue at the back of the throat and their function is to help protect against infection. Horses don't have discrete tonsils, but they do have a considerable amount of lymphoid tissue in the membrane lining the pharynx (throat).

In young horses, this tissue can become reactive in response to local viral infections and form 'nodules', and the throat can appear inflamed, just like a child with a sore throat. If the nodules are large enough, the horse might temporarily make an abnormal respiratory noise at exercise. The nodules usually regress without treatment.



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