

What is arthritis in horses?

- Arthritis or osteoarthritis, is a common degenerative joint disease in horses, causing pain, inflammation, and potentially lameness.
- In healthy horse joints, cartilage covers the bone ends, in arthritis horses the cartilage is damaged or worn away causing pain and discomfort.
- While horses of any age can be affected, arthritis is more common in older horses due to years of wear and tear on their joints.
- Once arthritic changes begin, they cannot be reversed but progression can be slowed down through proper management.

How do I know if my horse has arthritis?

Symptoms of arthritis are:

- A horse may exhibit lameness after periods of rest or show a lameness that improves with exercise.
- Arthritic horses may appear stiff, particularly after rest, and have a reduced range of motion.
- Swelling or heat around the affected joint can be a sign of arthritis.
- The horse may be reluctant to work or show a decreased ability to perform as they once did.
- Changes to a horse's gait, such as shortened stride or uneven movement can be an indicator of joint problems.
- Pain when the affected joint is bent or flexed is also a sign there is an issue.
- Compensatory muscle development can be seen in arthritis cases.

How can I manage my horse's arthritis?

There are several ways you can help your horse:

- Managing weight- horses carrying excess weight can put unnecessary stress and strains on their joints.

- Exercise - depending on the location and severity of your horse's arthritis, exercise can be beneficial in reducing stiffness but should be regularly assessed to make sure your horse is comfortable as doing too much can lead to further damage and inflammation.
- Turnout - optimise turnout to encourage gentle movement on the joints. Consider appropriate footing as steep hills or uneven terrain may be unsuitable as may who they are turned out with. Quiet companions, who will not chase them around are best.
- Stabling - Long periods in the stable should be avoided where possible. Arthritic horses become increasingly stiff when stood for prolonged periods of time. When turnout is limited, consider an arena or yard for them to stretch their legs in.
- Joint Supplements - These may be beneficial in supporting your arthritic horse.
- Anti-inflammatory/Pain relief - Your vet may suggest medication to help reduce inflammation and for pain management.
- Medicated Injections - In some cases, directly injecting the joint with medication can also be an option.
- Steroids - Steroids can often be used to help reduce inflammation in the joints.
- Your vet will be able to advise you on the best way of managing your horse's condition.
- Quality of life - Regularly assess your horse's quality of life considering their mental and physical wellbeing.

Will equine hydrotherapy benefit my horse with arthritis?

Swimming provides a low-impact, non-weight-bearing exercise option for arthritic horses, helping them maintain muscle strength and joint flexibility without putting stress on their joints.

This is because swimming allows muscles to be strengthened without concussive forces - helping to better support the joints and minimise the strain they're under.

Arthritis management in horses (continued)

- Swimming engages muscles, promoting strength and flexibility, which is crucial for maintaining mobility and function in horses with arthritis. It is also a great way to improve cardiovascular fitness.
- The cool water can help reduce inflammation and ease pain, while the gentle movement can improve circulation and promote healing.