



6 signs every horse owner should know about arthritis

By Alberto Rullan, VMD

The idea to write this article came from my wife Katie. Sitting at the Orlando International Airport, delayed by a thunderstorm, she told me: “my clients always ask me if their animals have arthritis, we should help them”.

That is a question we can answer and help our clients to detect the most common signs of arthritis.

Arthritis is a very common disease in horses. This disease is an equal opportunity attacker, meaning all kinds and all ages of horses might have it. In fact, we see juvenile arthritis in all breeds more commonly than we would like.

In my experience, at least seventy five (75) percent of the lameness problems we see, are due to arthritis. In this article, I am not going to tell you everything you need to know about arthritis. I’m sure you can go to the internet and find tons of more information. What I’m going to give you here is useful information that you can apply today.

Just to be clear, arthritis means inflammation of the joint. The term is used interchangeably with osteoarthritis. Some causes for arthritis could be wear and tear, overuse, joint instability, trauma to the joint and more. We, veterinarians, also like to talk about genetic and nutrition predisposition of this disease.

As you read this article, I want you to think of horses as if you were in their shoes. It’s important to realize that horses show the same symptoms as we do when it comes to pain and athletic ability.

Have you ever heard someone complaining that their knee hurts?

Think about how they move. Come on... Do it! Observe how they get up from a chair. How they go upstairs or downstairs.

Now observe your horse

Number 1: **Your horse is not moving the same way as it used to**

Your horse can be moving slower than previously. This applies to any horse with any athletic capacity and any breed. It can be very insidious (gradual effect with harmful ways). This will come with subtle changes over a period of time rather than overnight, unless there is an accident or a traumatic event involved.

Number 2: **There is a short stride**

One of the complaints I get from trainers is that their horse is not reaching as far as they used to. Usually one of the legs, although sometimes multiple ones, do not stretch as much as the others. We call this asymmetry on the gait.

Depending on the joint involved, you will see different behaviors on the pattern of the stride. Think about a moment you hurt your knee or your ankle. If you have never being hurt, you can ask a friend who has. How far forward did you bring your leg in order to walk? Were you able to jump the same distance? Probably not.

Number 3: **Your ride is not as smooth as it used to be**

Sometimes the only complaint I get is that the horse does not feel very comfortable anymore. It could be a choppy gate, could be a bunny hopping type of gate or any other feeling you perceive as a rider. This is not as easy to recognize as a source of arthritis as other signs. However, it's a very good red flag for the rider to realize there is something not 100%.

Number 4: **You notice a swollen joint**

This is a very easy sign to notice. Especially because you will see a difference between other joints. For example, if one fetlock is swollen, you can compare it to other fetlocks on your horse. Sometimes, nature can throw a little curve at you and your horse have all joints swollen, but this is the exception rather than the norm.

The reason a joint will be swollen is because there is increase in the amount of fluid in it. This can be perceived easier in some joints than others. For example, fetlocks, knees, stifles and upper hock joints are probably the easiest ones to notice. Coffin joints, pastern, lower hock joints, neck and back are more challenging to observe.

Number 5: **There is decreased range of motion in any joint**

In my life, the perfect example for this is my grandmother. She loves to nit, every year she has a harder time grabbing the smaller needles. Because, her fingers don't move as easily anymore. She has decreased range of motion. Same with horses, when they have arthritis in any of their joints, you will notice a decreased range of motion. Of course, this is easier to notice in joints that have a high range of motion such as fetlocks, knees (carpus), neck; and slightly more

difficult to notice in lower range of motion joints such as pastern, lower hock joints and back joints. With practice, any rider can detect the most subtle changes in any joint.

Number 6: **When you ride him, he starts stiff and then sort of “warms” out of it**

As a rule of thumb, if a lameness improves with exercise, there is a high chance, it is a joint related issue, rather than soft tissue (tendons or ligaments). For example, due to an old back injury I developed back arthritis. Quite often, especially when I don't take my joint supplements and don't have a balanced diet, I have a gnawing lower back pain. As I start moving, stretching and or exercising, this pain will significantly diminish. Horses with arthritis will experience the same phenomenon, they will start moving a bit stiff or slightly lame, then they will loosen up and be able to do their job.

Conclusion

These are the most common signs of arthritis we see in horses at our practice. Since a very high percentage of all lameness that we see are created by arthritis, these are also some of the most common signs of lameness we see. In order to confirm these suspicions, we perform a lameness examination, take radiographs (X-rays) and/or perform an ultrasound study. This will give us certainty of the cause of the problem and how to treat it.

Fortunately, the treatment of arthritis is very straight forward once we know the cause and where is it coming from. Our approach include a combination of local treatment to the joints that are affected, in addition to systemic joint supplements.

For more information about how to treat your horse, please don't hesitate to contact us at 352-307-3690 or www.performanceequinevs.com