

Ask A Vet: Equine Arthritis Options

Sunday, May 15, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Our gelding has suffered from hock arthritis for several years. We are considering having him injected. What will be injected and is this the right thing to do?

Dear Reader,

Joint injection as a method of treating lame horses has come a long way in the last twenty years. It used to be confined mostly to race track practice and considered quite risky by some. Now, it is a useful and common occurrence, considered by most equine veterinarians to be standard practice.

Most joint injections are undertaken in the horse to treat degenerative joint disease or arthritis. Multiple drugs may be used, each with its own function. Steroids, such as Depo-Medrol or Vetalog, are powerful anti-inflammatories which give pain relief. Sodium hyaluronate products help lubricate the joint and stimulate the production of more joint fluid by the joint cartilage. Antibiotics are used to help prevent or control an existing infection within the joint capsule. IRAP is a protein incubated from the horse's own blood and re-introduced into the joint. This protein competes with the inflammatory mediator interleukin-1s receptor at the cellular level, thus preventing inflammation inside the joint.

Before joint therapy of this type is undertaken, your veterinarian could do a thorough lameness exam to make sure the source of the lameness is identified. This exam may include palpation of the limbs, application of hoof testers, lunging, flexion tests, and/or diagnostic nerve blocks. Your veterinarian may decide that further diagnostics such as x-rays or ultrasound are needed to further explore the cause of the lameness. If, after consultation you decide joint injections are the right therapy for your horse, your veterinarian will administer a light sedative and the area where the needle is inserted will be surgically prepped. Clipping the horse's hair is usually not necessary. The veterinarian will then administer the medication using sterile technique.

Introducing medication into joints has reduced pain and benefited many horses. But it is not a cure-all, rather one of many tools that can be used to manage joint related lameness. This tool is one best used in consultation with your veterinarian and in conjunction with a comprehensive management plan incorporating joint supplements, weight management, and occasional use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatories in order to maximize the athletic performance and quality of life for your horse.

-Dr. Wade Hammond