

Pain management and Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory drugs

Freedom from pain is an essential part of horse welfare and managing a horse's pain levels plays a huge role in recovery from disease and injury.

Detection and recognising pain in horses can be very challenging. Horses are very good at hiding signs of pain and evaluation requires careful observation and interpretation of abnormal behaviour.

Signs of pain in your horse

Signs can sometimes be easy to detect, for example;

- Rolling, pawing, flank watching in colic
- Reluctance to put a foot down or an exaggerated head nod in lameness.
- Holding an eye closed in ocular pain
- Dropping food and slow chewing in dental pain.

But equally signs may be very subtle and include; change in facial expression, behaviour changes, restlessness, low head carriage, loss of interest in food etc.



What are the main painkillers available and how do they work?

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (Nsaids), such as 'Bute' are probably the most widely used group of drugs used to manage pain in horses. Nsaids are a class of drug that reduces pain, decreases fever, prevents blood clots and reduces inflammation. They work by inhibiting the activity of cyclooxygenase enzymes (COX1 and/or COX2) which are involved in the synthesis of key inflammatory mediators.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs available for use in horses include, Phenylbutazone (Bute), Suxibuzone, Flunixin, Meloxicam, Carprofen, Ketoprofen, Firocoxib and Vedaprofen. These can be given orally as well as by injection in many cases but often are available as topical creams, lotions or gels. They all have slightly differing properties and some have slightly more side effects than others.

Your vet will help you decide which one is right for your horse, depending on the pain and reasons for the pain.

Why is managing your horse's pain important?

Your horse deserves freedom from pain and it is an essential part of horse welfare.

Pain management plays an important role in recovery - from both injury and illness.

If your horse is in pain it can change their behaviour and have an impact on their performance.

Side effects of Nsaids

As with many medications, Nsaids have side effects and it is very important to balance the risk of any side effects with the benefits of treating your horse. Side effects can include:

- Stomach ulcers and colonic ulcers. This can result in loose droppings, diarrhoea and colic. Protein will be lost through the gut and bleeding into the gut may occur leading to anaemia
- Kidney damage. Cell death occurs in the kidney, especially if the horse is dehydrated, resulting in kidney disease and potential failure. Clinical signs would include increased drinking and urination, poor hair coat and weight loss
- Occasionally skin rashes can be seen, liver problems (if Nsaids are used with other drugs or the horse already has liver disease), blood problems (dyscrasias)



Managing the use of Nsaids

- You cannot use these drugs in horses, unless Section IX of your horse passport is signed, removing them from the human food chain
- Never use in foals without very careful monitoring of the GI tract and the kidneys
- If using long term in the management of osteoarthritis, blood samples should be taken regularly to check on gut and kidney function. Health assessments should be performed every 6 months to ensure there are no problems and to discuss the appropriate dose and possible options to these drugs
- Stop any Nsaid drugs immediately if you see signs of diarrhoea
- Always ensure horses on these drugs are fully hydrated and have access to water at all times

Even though a dose of 'Bute' doesn't sound like a big deal, Nsaids should always be used with extreme caution. Always speak to your vet to decide if these drugs are appropriate or if other pain management medication or techniques should be used.

If you are worried about pain management for your horse and would like to speak to someone about what the options are, give us a call.