

## Equine Lymphangitis

A relatively common and yet extremely concerning condition in the horse.



### What is Lymphangitis?

Lymphangitis is a relatively common and yet extremely concerning condition in the horse which can lead to long term problems and lameness even when treated promptly and correctly. Lymphangitis involves inflammation and disruption of the lymphatic system which drains fluid from the tissues back to the main vessels of the horse. The lymphatic system is a complex network of very delicate vessels which are easily damaged. Bacterial infection can easily block these fragile vessels. This causes massive rapid swelling of the tissues which is exceedingly painful. Usually only one leg is affected, and most commonly it is a hind leg that is involved. It is usually caused by bacterial infection, although the wound that the bacteria entered through may be tiny or undetectable.

### What does it look like?

A horse with lymphangitis will be off colour, often not eating, have a high temperature and normally have a very swollen limb (although the swelling may not fully develop for 24- 48 hours). The swelling will often involve the whole limb, with the hindleg being most commonly affected. The horse will generally not want to move at all, but if made to move, will tend to carry the leg very stiffly as it is painful for the horse to bend the leg.

The majority of the swelling is often centred on the inside aspect of the limb in the early stages, but then progresses to involve the whole of the leg. Normally it affects a hind leg and the swelling may reach above the stifle, sometimes with a hot painful swelling of the udder in mares, or the sheath in geldings. If a fore limb is involved then the swelling often reaches into the axilla (armpit) of the horse. Generally the horse will be lame.

This whole process can happen very quickly, with the horse changing from being completely normal to very painful and off colour within a few hours. In extreme cases the swelling will be so severe that serum will start to leak through the skin.

### What is the treatment?

Aggressive prompt antibiotic treatment is essential, along with anti-inflammatory treatment. Generally injectable drugs are required, which will often be followed up by medication in feed. Treatment may need to be continued for many weeks. Although corticosteroids are associated with some negative effects (such as reducing the horse's ability to fight the infection itself) they are often necessary to control the horse's inflammation. Cold hosing, bandaging of the limb, physiotherapy and exercise (as soon as the horse is able to move comfortably) can all help the leg return to normal as soon as possible.

Even with very quick appropriate treatment, some horses are left with a thickened leg long term, and many horses are prone to repeat episodes of lymphangitis.

### How can I prevent it happening again?

Horses that have had lymphangitis are often prone to recurrence. You can help prevent this by:

- Regular daily exercise
- Avoid unnecessary box rest
- Treat all wounds, no matter how tiny, by thorough cleaning and application of an antibacterial cream
- Call your vet as soon as possible if you notice any signs of swelling or lameness
- Deep tissue massage techniques can help with lymphatic drainage.

[MKTG/Equine/Collateral/EquineInformation/Equine Lymphangitis](#)



Scarsdale Vets - Equine  
Markeaton Lane  
Derby  
DE22 4NH  
Telephone: 01332 294929  
[www.scarsdalevets.com/equine](http://www.scarsdalevets.com/equine)

