



Managing pain in your horse

WHAT IS PAIN?



An unpleasant sensory experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage.

WHEN IS PAIN EXPERIENCED?



A horse experiences pain when pain receptors in the body respond to a painful stimulus by sending an impulse up the nerve fibres to the spinal cord and subsequently into the brain.

Through a process of learning your horse is taught to avoid pain-causing situations.

TYPES OF PAIN (ACUTE V CHRONIC)



There are differences in pain related to the duration and intensity of discomfort. The terms 'acute' and 'chronic' describe the duration and not the intensity of pain. Acute pain is only present for a short period of time (hours to days) whereas chronic pain is present for a longer period (days to weeks or more).

Although acute pain is unpleasant, it can be beneficial by making a horse remove itself from the cause of pain by not bearing weight on a limb for example. Certain types of pain have their own names such as lameness where the horse experiences musculo-skeletal discomfort. Repeated episodes of acute pain teach the horse to avoid contact with certain items or situations.

Chronic pain is of no apparent benefit to any species and may cause major changes in behaviour. A horse may become reluctant to perform the activity that previously caused pain.

WHAT CAUSES PAIN?



Just as in people, different kinds of stimuli or injury can cause different levels of pain in your horse. Pain is a sensation produced by the stimulation of specialised nerve-endings which are plentiful in the skin, membranes, body linings, body cavities and joints. It may be mediated through physical contact or via chemicals released from damaged tissue such as in joint infection.



THE SIGNS OF PAIN



A horse's behaviour can be unique to the type of pain it is experiencing. Its reaction to pain is dependent upon its personality and the degree of pain it is experiencing. There is no substitute for being familiar with your own horse so that you are able to recognise how it shows pain.

RECOGNISING THE SIGNS

- ▲ Restlessness
- ▲ Sweating
- ▲ Lying down more than usual
- ▲ Depression with lowered head
- ▲ Rigid stance
- ▲ Anxious appearance, dilated pupils and glassy eyes
- ▲ Flared nostrils
- ▲ Muscle tremors
- ▲ Increased respiratory/pulse rate
- ▲ Reluctance to move
- ▲ Limbs held in unusual positions
- ▲ Alterations in weight bearing, including weight-shifting from one limb to another
- ▲ Abnormal gait
- ▲ Reduced appetite
- ▲ Weight loss

It is important to realise that any one of these signs on its own does not necessarily mean that your horse is in pain.

HOW DO VETS TREAT PAIN IN HORSES?



Treatments can vary from simple physical therapy to complicated drug regimes. Working together with your vet will be important in determining the most appropriate treatment plan for your horse. Depending on the diagnosis, action may be required from the vet (injection or operation) or yourself. It is important that owners are aware of their obligations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Your vet will:

- ▲ advise on the correct medication
- ▲ prescribe the proper dose
- ▲ explain how to administer the most appropriate pain relief
- ▲ explain how to look after your horse during the treatment and any specific stable management requirements
- ▲ describe the benefits of the treatment and make clear any possible risks or side effects