

Osteoarthritis of the Small Hock Joints ('Spavin')

The hock of the horse consists of four joints. The top joint (tarsocrural) is the largest joint, and is the joint responsible for the vast majority of flexion and extension of the hock. The lower three joints are all much smaller with very little movement between bones. The lowest two joints (tarsometatarsal and distal intertarsal) are the two joints most commonly affected by 'bone spavin'.

What are the signs of bone spavin?

The most common sign of this disease is hindlimb lameness. The condition often occurs in both hind legs and, whilst one leg may be worse than the other, if both are similarly affected the horse may appear stiff or short striding behind rather than obviously lame. In some cases no lameness may be evident but the horse may be reluctant to work or show signs of back pain.

How is it diagnosed?

To confidently diagnose this disease your vet will take a thorough history and will examine the horse at a walk and a trot in a straight line. They may do flexion tests and may need to see the horse lunged on a variety of surfaces. Nerve blocks will be used to pinpoint the source of the lameness. Local anaesthetic is often injected directly into the small hock joints. Having done this X rays can be taken to confirm the diagnosis and assess the hock joints.

In some cases nuclear scintigraphy ('bone scans') or MRI scans may be necessary to confirm the diagnosis.

How can it be treated?

The most common treatment for horses suffering from this condition is medication of the small hock joints by direct injection into the joint. Usually the injection is a corticosteroid solution, though other medications can also be used. Some horses need repeated injections of the joint. In some cases, particularly where injections into the joint have been of limited benefit, the joint may be injected with ethanol to fuse the bones (arthrodesis). Because these small joints have very little movement this has minimal effect on the horse's movement but can greatly reduce the pain associated with arthritic change.

If you think your horse may be lame, stiff or reluctant to work please contact the clinic to speak to a vet.