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Swelling limbs and weight loss over winter

What causes limbs to swell?

It can be caused by infection, changes to the blood vessels, bruising, allergic reactions, organ dysfunction, worms or as a result of reduced movement.

Limb swelling can be a sign of inflammation particularly when coupled with heat and pain. It can be indicative of a tendon injury, if this is suspected it is important to box rest as soon as possible, cold hose twice a day and speak to your vet.

If the limb gets injured, fluid moves to the area of injury due to an increase in blood flow and the blood vessels undergo changes that result in them becoming more permeable (leaky). This means that proteins can move out of the vessels, resulting in fluid also moving out, creating oedema. This oedema is present in soft tissue swellings where there is tendon or ligament damage. Trauma can also result in further damage to the blood vessels enabling blood to leave the blood vessels creating a bruise or haematoma.

Limb swelling can also be due to when horses are standing still for long periods of time. There are no muscles in horse's lower limbs so to move fluid back up the limb they rely solely on one way valves in the vessels and compression of the frog to push fluid back up the leg. If the horse is immobile for a long period the fluid ends up accumulating and the horse develops filled legs. Support bandages can help reduce this, as can ice boots or cold hosing. Exercise and turn out will also help improve this but may not be possible in all cases.



Horses can also end up with limb swellings due to infection. Bacterial infections only require the tiniest abrasion or cut to the skin to begin. Bacterial infections appear quickly after an injury, making the limb swollen, hot and painful to touch. The horse may be off their food and non-weight bearing. The horse may also be pyrexic (temperature over 38.5C). The skin may also start oozing or sloughing off. These infections are termed cellulitis or lymphangitis depending on how deep they impact the leg.

To treat cellulitis or lymphangitis the horse will need a course of antibiotics and anti inflammatories. movement is also important to encourage cellulitis.

It is important to keep wounds clean and respond to them quickly to try to prevent these infections. Mud fever is also a common culprit for causing cellulitis and lymphangitis so it is important to deal with small lesions as soon as possible.

Limb swelling can also be a sign of internal issues, such as liver disease or internal parasites. If the horse also develops weight loss or a swelling under their abdomen/chest then it is important to speak to a vet as further tests may be necessary to identify the cause.

Cardiac disease can also be a rare cause of limb swelling and is usually accompanied with exercise intolerance, increased jugular pulse and swelling under the horse's abdomen and chest.





Weight loss over winter

Horses are designed to put weight on during the spring and summer months and then to lose weight over winter. This is particularly important for the good doers to reduce their risk of laminitis going into the following spring. However, some horses, particularly older individuals can lose more than they need and it is important to minimize this as much as possible.

How can I reduce the risk of my horse losing weight over winter?

- Ensure regular dentals- for some horses this may be as often as every 3 months but for most it is every 6-12 months. Older horses are more likely to have issues with their teeth such as loose painful teeth and painful incisors due to Equine Orthodontic Resorptive Teeth Hypoplasia impacting their ability to eat.
- Ensure your horse is wormed appropriately guided by worm egg counts and tape worm tests.
- Appropriate rugging for the conditions.
- Regular health checks with any required blood tests such as monitoring for Cushings.
- Keeping your horse comfortable- lameness can prevent a horse thriving and result in weight loss, many older horses require daily pain relief or joint management.
- Providing adequate suitable nutrition- if your horse is missing teeth or has minimal grinding surface they may need to have soaked feeds to replace their forage.
- Walking in hand on cold days when horses are stuck in stables but also when they are standing in fields as on very cold days they may still not be moving around, moving helps generate heat and reduces the risk of impaction.

My horse never loses weight over winter, and is always overweight according to the vet, what do I do?

- You should avoid rugging your horse or keep the weight of your rugs to a minimum.
- Avoid giving excessive hard feeds to your horse, potentially just having them on a balancer.
- Consider what forage you are giving, many good doers don't require rich haylage.
- Try to keep exercising your horse, riding, lunging, free schooling and walking in hand all help to keep your horse trim.
- Potentially clip your horse to enable them to shiver off some of their weight.
- Ensure your horse isn't suffering from any orthopaedic pain- pain can make some horses lose weight but in others it does the opposite as it stops the horse moving and exercising themselves when turned out.
- Blood test for Equine Metabolic Syndrome and medicate if needed.

Don't forget we have a worming package that includes four worm egg counts a year, a saliva test for tape worm, text reminders and one wormer a year (if it is needed!)

Want to see what we are talking about?

Check out the Summerleaze Vets Youtube channel to see a video of how we perform our worm egg counts as well as our vets discuss body condition scoring and Cushings.

01297304007