



Injecting joints & tendon sheaths

Injections into these synovial structures are vital for several reasons:-

- *To accurately diagnose lameness*
- *To treat lameness problems*
- *To make horses more comfortable*
- *To help older horses*
- *To allow horses to compete at the top of their capability*

In order to carry out such injections, we like to clip the injection site and scrub it with antiseptics. The drugs to be injected are usually anti-inflammatory, lubricating or cartilage building agents.

For treatment of arthritis or inflammation of tendon sheaths, injections of anti-inflammatory agents and cartilage protectors is proven and far more effective than some of the oral supplements.



There are some risk with these injections. Luckily these are rare, and some of the unavoidable complications may not affect the end result.

1. **Flares.** This is a chemical, allergic-type reaction, which is rare. The horse will go very lame hours after the injection and show heat and swelling. It is rarely long-term uncomfortable, and the injection may still be efficacious.
2. **Infections.** This is the most severe side effect. An emergency operation may be necessary to save the joint and sometimes the horse's life. This is a very rare complication. Sometimes owners do not want their horse clipped (for show horses for example). It is vital to warn the vet and nurse about this. The risk of infection becomes higher, even though we will do out utmost to avoid it, if the horse is not clipped.
3. **Needle Breakage.** This is almost unheard of, but could happen in fractious horses. Good restraint of the horse will be best achieved through any combination of experienced handlers (a good reason to bring the horse to the clinic, which is vital for some of the more difficult joints), a twitch (to distract the horse) and sedation.

Often, joint injections will involve the use of steroids. These extremely useful and powerful anti-inflammatory drugs do sometimes also have some less desirable side effects. It has to be borne in mind problems with these are rare. Specific risks of steroid injections are:

1. **Temporary weakening of cartilage.** For high motion joints, it is vital to give the horse 5-7 days of rest to avoid damage. The weakness of the cartilage is short lived and the beneficial long-term effects of steroids in joints outweighs this inconvenience by far.
2. **Laminitis.** On rare occasions, steroid injections have been associated with the onset of laminitis. This usually happens only in horses that are predisposed (those that have had laminitis before, or horses with Cushings disease and particularly overweight horses). As it is best not to exercise, this may predispose them even more. Laminitis after injection of a steroid can be really difficult to treat, and some horses continue to worsen in spite of treatment. Make sure you avoid supplements, rich grass and grain-based feeds for up to three weeks in at risk horses.

In spite of all these risks, joint injections rarely cause problems. They are extremely useful to deliver the right drugs in the place where they are needed. It is our opinion that the benefits outweigh the risks by far, but awareness of these risks should allow owners to call us as soon as suspicious signs are noted. Heat, pain and swelling and increased lameness always warrant a phone call to the practice.