

## Caring for Your Equine Athlete During Long Shows

With several of the equine industry's largest shows scheduled in the next several months, we went to the experts to get some tips about how to help your equine athlete stay healthy during long shows. Dr. Greg Byrne of Equine Veterinary Services PLC, Scottsdale, Ariz., whose team provides veterinary care at 15 horse shows annually in seven states and Canada, gave us some insight.

Common problems that are encountered at equestrian events can be broken down into two broad categories - medical problems and musculoskeletal problems.

Gastrointestinal Medical Problems are common. General colic signs can arise from a multitude of causes such as changes in feed/feeding schedule, anxiety about unfamiliar surroundings and a decrease in water intake. These stressors can result in mild dehydration and colic signs ranging from inappetence to signs of acute pain (rolling, sweating, etc.). Good preventive measures that Dr. Byrne recommends include, but are not limited to:

- pre-shipment electrolytes and/or a moderate dose of mineral oil by tube prior to departure
- frequent rest and water stops along the route
- enough barn hay and grain to last through the show or at least to arrive at the destination to help make a gradual change
- use of ULCERGARD® (omeprazole) to help prevent equine stomach ulcers<sup>1</sup> for a duration of 8 to 28 days before and/or during shows; ULCERGARD is the only proven and FDA-approved product<sup>1</sup> for this need.

Respiratory Medical Problems can occur in horses during shipping, with the horse arriving dehydrated and coughing, which is often called "shipping fever." Or, a horse can arrive healthy but start presenting clinical signs during the show. The stress of hauling and showing, combined with close confinement to other horses (some of which may have compromised health status) put horses at an increased risk for respiratory tract infections ranging from rhinitis to pleuritis. All horses that exhibit at large shows should have respiratory vaccine boosters at least three weeks prior to travel. Dr. Byrne's practice recommends vaccination four times per year to clients who have traveling horses. The use of immunostimulants (i.e., Zylexis) is also recommended by his practice prior to traveling. Last, his practice suggests careful monitoring of air quality and head

position of horses during travel and daily walks in an outdoor setting to help keep airways clear.

Cardiovascular Medical Problems are relatively uncommon and are typically associated with dehydration. Maintaining adequate hydration through water intake, electrolytes and supplementation, and if needed, intravenous fluids helps keep the horse's blood volume at appropriate levels for optimal health and performance.

Skin Medical Issues are quite common and are most often associated with allergic reactions to new surroundings. Hives are a common reaction to bedding and feed changes. Infectious conditions like pastern dermatitis or scratches are a common cause of lameness and poor performance. Attention to skin and preventive wraps with chlorhexaderm and antibiotics are good measures to prevent painful limb edema secondary to dermatitis.

A common ocular problem is conjunctivitis with an associated nasolacrimal occlusion. It is important to stain any painful or swollen eye. Corneal ulceration is also quite common at horse shows and needs to be managed medically to prevent progression.

Musculoskeletal Problems probably account for the majority of conditions Dr Byrne attends to at shows. There are two broad categories – chronic musculoskeletal and acute or transient musculoskeletal issues. Chronic cases involve horses that arrive with a lameness history. Osteoarthritis, foot conformation, etc., can contribute to a class of horses that compete with a baseline level of lameness. Preventative measures include precompetition lameness exams followed by diagnostic blocks and treatment prior to show competition. A combination of current therapies from oral supplements to joint injection, shockwave therapy, etc., may be utilized to address ongoing musculoskeletal issues prior to an event.

Severe musculoskeletal injuries at horse shows are lamenesses that develop at the competition site. The more common examples would be tendonitis/desmitis and laminitis. Acute injury to ligaments and tendons warrants early aggressive diagnostics such as ultrasonography to determine the extent of an injury and begin a recovery plan. Acute laminitis occurs at shows usually secondary to work changes, hard surfaces (i.e., concrete stalls and walkways). Horses should be radiographed and aggressively treated to decrease inflammation and prevent disease progression. Dr. Byrne's practice often recommends the use of SoftRide boots for horses prone to foot disorders for traveling and standing on less than ideal surfaces.

In summary, any horse that is preparing for competition should have a thorough workup with the veterinarian/trainer/farrier and owner. A precompetition game plan based on the horse's history and condition should be developed and executed to maximize the health and success of the horse throughout competition. A good diagnostic plan will address areas of concern and hopefully "open eyes" to look for warning signs of things that can occur at competitions.

A well-rested, well-fed horse that has had minimal change in day-to-day routine will fare better at events. It is critical to monitor horses for appetite, hydration, temperature and musculoskeletal comfort daily.

Dr. Byrne invites inquiries regarding equine health care and wishes all competitors the best of luck as the 2013 show season comes to a close.

<sup>1</sup>ULCERGARD product label.

**IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION:** *ULCERGARD can be used in horses that weigh at least 600 pounds. Safety in pregnant mares has not been determined.*

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