



Septic Arthritis or Joint ill Can Threaten Foals

The Educated Horseman: Health Series



Septic arthritis, more commonly known as joint ill, typically is caused by a bacterial infection in foals. This infection can be life threatening if not treated appropriately, and even if treated, it still can leave lasting effects on an animal's overall soundness and athletic performance.

A foal's umbilicus is the most common bacterial entry point, but inhalation of bacteria through the lungs or bacteria found in the foal's gastrointestinal tract also can be responsible. If failure of passive transfer occurs, the foal has a decreased immune system and is unable to fight off the infection, which rapidly spreads throughout the bloodstream – eventually resulting in an infection of the joint.

Diagnosing a foal with joint ill can be rather difficult. But two of the most important symptoms of joint ill are the sudden onset of lameness and joint swelling. Additional clinical signs may be exhibited if the foal is suffering from symptoms of either gastrointestinal or respiratory infections, such as fever, diarrhea, decreased nursing, coughing and/or nasal discharge. If the umbilicus is involved, obvious swelling and drainage also may occur. Special care should be taken when examining a lame foal with no obvious umbilical symptoms, since underlying infection of structures within the abdomen can exist even if the umbilicus appears normal. A joint fluid sample, a complete blood count, radiographs of the suspected joint, ultrasonography of the umbilical structures and a thorough physical examination from a veterinarian are used to diagnose joint ill in foals.

Once a foal is suspected of having joint ill, immediate broad-spectrum antibiotic treatment is recommended. Even when the exact organism causing the infection isn't known, immediate treatment with a broad-spectrum antibiotic generally will reduce the chances of a permanently damaged joint. Depending on the severity of the infection and the affected area, your veterinarian may recommend joint flushing, anti-inflammatory medications, surgical cleaning of the joint (arthroscopy) and anti-ulcer treatments in addition to antibiotics. Type S (synovial) is the infection of the synovial membrane, Type E (epiphysis) is the infection of



the bone and Type P (physis) the infection of the growth plate.

Despite advancements in the treatment of septic arthritis or joint ill, the prognosis for foals with the condition is still guarded, at best. Research suggests 42 to 81 percent of foals survive. Most commonly, foals respond well to the treatment of the infected joint but suffer from other problems associated with reduced immunity due to failure of passive transfer or secondary issues from long-term clinical treatment.

Aggressive and immediate action needs to be taken with any foal displaying unexplainable sudden lameness. There are a number of factors that affect the prognosis of foals with joint ill, including overall immunity, number of joints involved, area of infection within the joint, severity and time of treatment. While there have been no long-term studies to evaluate the athletic performance of foals following joint ill, early treatment can reduce the long-term effects of joint ill.

If you suspect your foal may be experiencing sudden unexplained lameness, contact your local veterinarian immediately.

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