

Some days you may feel your horse is having an “off day”, and I’m sure there are days when we all feel slightly off par, but in some cases this loss of performance can become a more persistent and worrying problem. Quite often the symptoms are rather vague and non-specific and it can be very difficult and frustrating for an owner, not least when trying to voice their concerns to their vet. The first thing I would emphasise is to never hesitate if you feel there may be a problem you would like to discuss with us, we are always available for advice and a chat through any concerns and hopefully will be able to come up with some suggestion to get to the root of the problem.

When considering the problem of poor performance we must bear in mind there may a variety of root causes, including;

- Orthopaedic problems
- Respiratory disease
- Cardiovascular dysfunction
- Equine Gastric Ulceration Syndrome (EGUS)
- Endocrine problems, such as “Cushing’s syndrome”

The first of these items, orthopaedic conditions, include all the various cause of lameness, which as I’m sure you’re aware, encompass a vast multitude of problems, and would need a huge textbook to discuss. I’ll attempt to cover the other 4 topics briefly as these are probably less familiar to most horse owners, thankfully!

Any condition that affects the horse’s ability to take in oxygen effectively is going to impact on his performance as his muscles require this oxygen to work effectively. Hence any respiratory condition will tend to impact on his performance, just as having a cold would make you less athletic! Many horses are not asked to perform at maximal lung capacity and there are some conditions that only affect performance of true equine athletes as these are using their maximal lung volume.

One interesting condition is Lower Airway Disease (LAD), a term covering a group of conditions;

- Inflammatory Airway Disease IAD
- Exercise Induced Pulmonary Haemorrhage EIPH
- Recurrent Airway Obstruction RAO
- Bacteria pneumonia
- Summer Pasture Associated Obstructive Pulmonary Disease SPOAD

These are just a few of the multitude of diseases and disorders that may be included. LAD is mostly seen in young racehorses that are required to produce a vast increase in oxygen capacity. Most other performance horses could in fact manage on one lung!

Things to look out for if you suspect that your horse may be suffering from a respiratory problem would be coughing, at exercise especially, any form of noise when exercising, nasal discharges and so on. As vets we would need to perform a general clinical exam, and then depending on what we may suspect we may want to watch the horse work, take some blood samples, and possibly examine the airway with an endoscope. The best thing you can do for your horse to prevent such conditions are to keep his vaccinations up to date, be aware when travelling and attempt to minimise mixing with unknown horses, and manage his environment, by using low-dust feed and bedding, soaking hay and ensuring good ventilation.

Fortunately, heart conditions limiting performance are fairly rare in the horse, for example in one referral hospital only 3% of poor performance cases were determined to be due to heart disease. The major cardiovascular reason for poor performance is a condition called Atrial Fibrillation (AF). This is when the atria, or the 2 smaller chambers of the heart, “vibrate” at an unregulated rhythm, and the ventricles or larger chambers are not stimulated to contract at the right rate. Again, the effect of AF on performance depends on the horse’s career, and will only really affect the true athletes. AF can be difficult to diagnose as some cases are only active at exercise and it’s mighty hard to listen with your stethoscope if the horse is galloping!

There is a high incidence of heart valve regurgitation in the general horse population, but often the murmur is only noticed when the owner presents the horse for evaluation due to poor performance. Some research indicates that all valves leak to a certain extent, just some more than others. Rarely there may be a true congenital (inborn) malformation of the heart or valve\’s.

EGUS is becoming more well known amongst horse owners. Reports show that there is a definite correlation between number and severity of ulceration and level of training or work that the horse is in. Signs can be vague and non-specific, but might include, poor weight gain, fussy eating, stressy behaviour such as wind sucking etc, and avoidance of certain types of work, especially jumping where stomach acid becomes more churned up and splashes around the stomach. The condition can only be definitively diagnosed using a gastroscope or small camera inserted into the stomach.



POOR PERFORMANCE

When “Cushing’s syndrome” is mentioned most owners conjure up an image of an old laminitic pony with a lovely curly coat, and often a horse that is miles away from the one that they are riding on a regular basis! But, as our knowledge and ability to diagnose improves, we are now finding that many horses who are in work but “are not the horse they were a couple of years ago” are testing positive for Cushing’s syndrome (PPID).

PPID involves an enlargement or tumour of the pituitary gland, which alters the levels of various hormones in the body. When diagnosed early we have a good chance of preventing the deterioration of the horse and regaining the same horse you had “a couple of years ago”. Diagnosis is by a simple reliable blood test to measure ACTH level.

To summarise what is a vast topic that we’ve have only briefly touched upon, there may be any one of a multitude of causes of poor performance, but please do contact us with any worries and we will help to shed some light!