

April 2021 Newsletter

Pain Management

Pain is an incredibly important component to life, it is protective, warning one not to push one self beyond breaking point, alerting one to the fact something internally is wrong. As vets one of our roles is to take the warning signs of pain and use them as sign posts as to where the problem is and to then reduce the level of pain the horse is in. Unfortunately as prey animals horses can be quite subtle when it comes to showing signs of pain particularly in more chronic cases so we may have to ask the person who knows that horse best, you as a owner as to if that horse is behaving normally for them. It is important to monitor any changes in your horse, such as if your horse is no longer lying down, could it be struggling to get back up once down, or is your horse no longer as happy picking up their hinds for the farrier could it be struggling with flexing their hocks. There are different pain scales available to help monitor a horse's pain for example the grimace scale. Facial expressions being indicative of pain in animals is far from a new idea with Charles Darwin in 1872 highlighting it in the *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.



Fig. 1. Horse Grimace Scale ([Dalla Costa et al., 2014](#)). The Horse Grimace Pain Scale with images and explanations for each of the six facial action units (FAUs). Each FAU is scored according to whether it is not present (score of 0), moderately present (score of 1) and obvious present (score of 2).



There a variety of different ways to provide pain relief. The most common method of pain relief in horses is the use of bute which is the ingredient in Butagran, Equipalazone and Danilon. Bute is a non-steroidal anti inflammatory (NSAID) so similar to how Ibuprofen is use in humans. Another NSAID we commonly use is Meloxicam which is the active ingredient in Inflacam, this can be used in meat producing animals, so is often used if a horse isn't signed out of the food chain in the passport. A stronger NSAID we often use in very painful horses is Flunixin. These NSAIDs reduce pain, reduce inflammation, can reduce a horse's fever, reduce excessive blood clotting and they can counteract endotoxemia in horses. As a result we use NSAIDs for a wide range of painful conditions from long term orthopaedic pain, acute trauma to colics. Every medication can have side effects and depending on what is wrong with your horse can alter which drug we prescribe, hence it is important to always speak to a vet before giving your horse any medication.



In addition to NSAIDs we have a range of other pharmaceutical options we can use including opioids and paracetamol. We tend to give the different pain relief medications as injectables or in their oral form but if the horse is in a hospital setting we can use opioid patches or have continuous IV infusions of pain relief. If needed to control pain we can use local anaesthetic to provide local blocks, these are short acting so tend to be used for identifying the source of a horse's pain or for surgical procedures. We can also perform epidurals on horses to relieve pain. For longer term pain relief we can inject joints with corticosteroids that act as anti inflammatories within the joint.

Pain management is not solely limited to pharmaceutical options with many other factors playing an important role depending on the case. In orthopaedic cases we will often give systemic pain relief and then use farriery to help reduce pressure on particular structures, for example with damage to a horse's Superficial Digital Flexor Tendon we may get the farrier to raise the horse's heel through the use of wedges or pads. Management can also play a role, horses with severe foot pain such as with laminitis will not only potentially do more damage by moving around if left out but can also make themselves more painful if turned out. In comparison in more arthritic cases we tend to encourage movement can help, that getting the horse to an appropriate level of fitness to help support their joints and keeping them active to an extent is beneficial to managing pain levels. Bandaging, casting or splinting to provide support can also help in some circumstances to reduce pain levels. Qualified bodyworkers such as physiotherapists can also help to relieve pressure points or areas of soft tissue tension, making the horse more comfortable. For horses with orthopaedic issues, the horses may have compensated for a significant period of time to avoid using the painful structure resulting in poor movement such as working hollow through their back or dishing, resulting abnormal strain elsewhere this can be rectified by managing the pain levels and often a rehabilitation program that includes the assistance of both farriers for remedial farriery and physiotherapists.

In conclusion it can be quite difficult to assess the level of pain a horse is in but with different tools such as the horse grimace scale we can try to monitor it. We have a wide range of different ways we can manage pain, these are not limited to pharmaceutical agents but include different management approaches and help from paraprofessionals.

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