

Tendon and Ligament Injuries: Causes and Prevention

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Poor conformation such as long, sloping pasterns can predispose a horse to tendon and ligament damage. There are several factors that contribute to overload and breakdown of tendons and ligaments. The first is conformation. Long sloping pasterns and/or long toes/low heels create more tension and load on tendons and ligaments.

Next is conditioning. Regular exercise creates strong bones, tendons and ligaments. However, exercise should be increased gradually over time to higher levels. Horses that are not properly conditioned and then ridden hard are very prone to tendon/ligament tearing. With conditioning also comes proper warm-up. Cold tissues are less pliable and therefore are more susceptible to injury.

Footing can also be problematic. Deep or slippery footing can cause the fetlock to drop too much, increase breakover, or create tremendous torque from twisting, all of which can lead to injury.

And finally, these injuries can sometimes happen simply from the horse exerting so much power during work that tissue tears. However, I feel this is a rare occurrence in properly conditioned horses.

I believe many of these injuries can be prevented by being aware of the above factors and taking necessary precautions. Address hoof balance issues, such as long toe/low heel, with your vet and farrier. Condition your horse carefully, and don't overwork him. Watch the footing: Deep sand, a slick base, and rocky or uneven ground are the enemies of tendons and ligaments.

Another consideration is protective legwear for horses. In general, I do recommend using boots that fit properly; a bad fit can do more harm than good. Look for boots that "sling" under the fetlock to support tendons and ligaments. Beware of some types of neoprene boots, which cause unwanted increased heat in the leg. Also, some horses are allergic to neoprene and will blister under these boots.

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