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Medications, Transport, and Laminitis

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It's not a good idea to routinely give your horse medication in the absence of veterinary supervision. Certainly, not all drugs are harmful, however, all effective medications have potential side effects of which you may not be aware.

Be particularly careful especially with the use of corticosteroid drugs. Although no one has been able to cause laminitis by giving a particular dose of *any* corticosteroid drug, labels for the drugs usually carry a warning about an association between corticosteroids and laminitis. Corticosteroids are very useful drugs for the treatment of a variety of conditions in the horse, and the risk appears to be fairly small (for example, one study following well over 200 horses that had their joints injected with corticosteroids found that *none* of them subsequently developed laminitis). Still, like any drug, corticosteroids should probably be used at the lowest effective dose, for the shortest amount of time necessary.

In some parts of the world (not the U.S.), a product known as Founderguard® is available. It's actually an antibiotic called virginiamycin. Studies have shown that feeding this antibiotic does help decrease the incidence of laminitis in horses that are kept on pasture. Unfortunately, it has little value as a treatment for laminitis; given 6 - 8 hours after the onset of laminitis, virginiamycin does nothing at all to stop the development of the disease.

Even though virginiamycin does appear to help prevent laminitis, some people have concerns about the feeding of low levels of antibiotics to animals. It's not so much that it hurts the animal, as it most likely tends to add to the very real problem of antibiotic resistance. When bacteria are exposed to antibiotics, over time, they can build up a resistance to them. As more and more antibiotic-resistant bacteria are selected, infections - *any* infection - become more difficult to treat. Feeding antibiotics on a routine basis is not a particularly good idea and certainly should not be substituted for good management practices.

Transport

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In this day of increased mobility, horses are moving around a lot more, as well. Fortunately, serious shipping problems are not particularly common in horses but transporting them does increase the risk for a number of medical problems, including laminitis. Things you can do to decrease the chance of shipping-related problems include:

- make sure that the horse is current on its vaccinations
- don't ship your horse if its sick
- don't make any dramatic changes prior to shipping
- try not to ship in really hot weather
- make sure that the horse has plenty of water
- don't feed grains while shipping
- try to make sure that there is adequate ventilation so as to help decrease respiratory problems
- consider wetting the hay to keep the dust down
- stop and allow the horse to move around and lower its head every eight hours.

Keeping a horse's head tied up during transport means that it can't let gravity help clear out its breathing passages. If the breathing passages don't clear, the risk of infections involving the lungs and/or chest cavity goes up. Laminitis is a common complication of such infections.

After you get to your destination, you'll want to get the horse out and moving around to get the kinks out, make sure that it's eating and drinking and keep track of its temperature for a few days. If the horse doesn't act normally, or if it starts to develop a fever (normal temperature is generally between 99 and 101 degrees Fahrenheit) you should call your veterinarian out immediately.