

Bruise, strain or sprain?

Signs to help you investigate the severity of a horse's swollen joint

No matter whether it affects a knee, fetlock, pastern or hock, sudden joint swelling is always cause for investigation. In some cases, damage is minimal and treatment relatively simple. In others, prompt veterinary attention is required and even then it may not salvage a horse's athletic career.

Three common types of joint injuries—bruises, strains and sprains—have characteristics that can help you distinguish between a minor problem and serious damage. Your veterinarian can make a definitive diagnosis.

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NAME	WHAT IT IS	HOW IT LOOKS	HOW IT FEELS	HORSE'S REACTION	HOW IT AFFECTS MOVEMENT
bruise	collection of blood under the skin caused by blunt trauma breaking blood vessels	pronounced swelling, often with a patch of many broken and disturbed hairs	soft swelling pits under pressure	no reaction to slight palpation but may flinch with greater pressure; minimal discomfort in response to joint flexion	horse walks, trots and turns with little or no noticeable lameness
strain	nontearing damage (stress, inflammation) of fibrous tissue (ligament, joint capsule)	diffuse swelling around joint; skin and hair are normal	spongy swelling develops over an hour or two	mild aversive reaction to palpation; some aversive reaction to joint flexion	horse slightly lame but not disabled
sprain	minor to extensive mechanical disruption (stretch, tear, rupture) of fibrous tissue (ligament, joint capsule) caused by overstress	discrete, dramatic swelling appears over one or both sides of a joint	warm, firm swelling develops shortly after injury	immediate, strong aversive reaction to both palpation and joint flexion	horse is obviously lame on a straight line and when turning