



Waterlane
EQUINE VETS

FACTSHEETS

Splints

“Popped” splints are one of the most frequently seen leg injuries in horses. They initially present as warm, swollen painful bumps below the knee and are most commonly seen on the inside of the cannon bone but they can also occur on the outside. The degree of lameness seen depends on the severity of the splint and whether the injury is recent or old. There are a variety of causes such as poor conformation, improper hoof balance, repeated work on hard surfaces, and direct trauma to the limb.



Now some anatomy: the cannon bone of the horse is called the 3rd Metacarpal (equivalent to the bone in your hand connecting to your middle finger). Attached on either side of it are the much smaller 2nd (inside) and 3rd (outside) Metacarpi – more commonly called the splint bones. These splint bones are nearly non-weightbearing, vestigial structures from when horses evolved from five toes to one in order to be faster than their predators. They are held to the cannon bone by the interosseous ligament which can tear or become inflamed from damage. This inflammation triggers new bone development (exocytosis) which gives you the hard lumpy feel and appearance. Depending on location, the extra bone formation can interfere and aggravate the suspensory ligament so it may be necessary to ultrasound the limb to check there is no damage.

(The image above left shows the front limbs viewed from behind and the blue arrow identifies a recently popped splint on the inside [metacarpal II] of the left forelimb).

Damage to the splint bone can range in severity, which means that the treatment for “splints” also varies. Mild, non-fractured cases will heal quickly with anti-inflammatories and rest but more severe, fractured cases will need surgical involvement. Get to know your horse’s limbs by running a hand down them daily so that you may identify any abnormalities when they first occur. It is important that a vet is called to establish the severity and prescribe the right treatment for your horse so they are on the fastest road to recovery with the least amount of complications.