



Horse Health:

Tendonitis and Desmitis

What is it?

Tendonitis and desmitis are two terms that describe inflammation and injury within the structures that support your horse's limbs.

Tendonitis means inflammation or damage to a tendon. Tendons are strong, fibrous bands that connect muscle to bone. In horses, the most commonly affected tendons are the **superficial digital flexor tendon (SDFT)** and the **deep digital flexor tendon (DDFT)**, especially in the forelimbs.

Desmitis refers to inflammation or injury of a ligament. Ligaments are slightly different from tendons - they connect bone to bone and provide stability to joints. Common sites of desmitis in horses include the suspensory ligament, the **collateral ligaments** of the coffin or fetlock joint, and the **check ligaments**.

Both conditions are part of the wider group of "soft tissue injuries." They are important causes of lameness in horses and, depending on severity, can have a big impact on performance and long-term soundness.

What causes it?

Tendon and ligament injuries usually occur because of overstrain. Horses' tendons and ligaments have to withstand huge forces, especially at speed or when landing from a jump.

Common causes include:

- **Overexertion:** Galloping, jumping, or working on hard ground.
- **Repetitive strain:** Micro-damage from everyday work builds up until fibres fail.
- **Poor footing:** deep or uneven surfaces put abnormal stress on the soft tissues.
- **Conformation:** Long, sloping pasterns, upright limbs, or poor hoof balance can predispose certain horses.
- **Trauma:** A direct blow or overstretching can cause acute injury.
- ✳ **Age and general wear-and-tear:** Older horses have more brittle tendons with reduced healing capacity.

What horses are at risk?

Any horse can develop tendonitis or desmitis, but some groups are at higher risk:

- **Performance horses:** Racehorses, eventers, showjumpers, and polo ponies. This is because they generally put more strain on their limbs.
- **Older horses:** Tissues lose elasticity with age.
- **Horses with poor foot balance:** Long toes, collapsed heels, or uneven shoeing all increase strain.
- **Horses in fast or intense work:** Sprinting, tight turns, and repeated jumping.
- **Horses in inconsistent work:** Lack of fitness followed by sudden hard exercise increases the chance of injury.

What are the symptoms?

Signs vary depending on severity and whether the injury is acute (sudden) or chronic (long-standing).

Typical symptoms include:

- **Lameness:** This can range from mild to severe. Sometimes lameness is only seen under saddle or at faster paces.
- **Heat:** Affected areas may feel warm to the touch.
- **Swelling:** In some specific injuries, there can be characteristic swelling. For example, a classic “bowed tendon” appearance can be seen with SDFT injuries.
- **Pain on palpation:** Your horse may resent the tendon or ligament being touched or gently squeezed.
- **Reduced performance:** Reluctance to go forward, jump, or maintain stride length.
- Some low-grade ligament injuries may only cause **subtle or intermittent signs**, which is why early veterinary assessment is important.

How is it diagnosed?

Your vet will first take a thorough history from you to determine exactly what has been happening. They will then usually combine a clinical examination with diagnostic imaging.

Diagnostic approaches include:

- **History and exam:** Your vet will ask about your horse’s workload, recent exercise, and when you first noticed signs. They will palpate (feel) the limbs for heat, swelling, or pain and watch the horse move in hand and on the lunge.
- **Nerve blocks:** Local anaesthetic injected into certain points around the leg can help pinpoint the source of lameness.
- **Ultrasound:** This is the gold standard for tendon and ligament injuries. It shows fibre damage, swelling, and allows monitoring of healing over time.

- **MRI:** In some cases this is used for complex foot or suspensory ligament cases.

How can it be treated or managed?

Treatment focuses on controlling inflammation, allowing repair, and then carefully rehabilitating the tissue.

- **Rest and controlled exercise:** Strict box rest may be advised initially, followed by a gradual programme of hand-walking, then ridden work. This is crucial for correct fibre alignment during healing.
- **Cold therapy:** Ice boots or cold hosing in the acute phase help reduce inflammation in some cases.
- **Bandaging/support boots:** Sometimes used to provide external support.
- **Anti-inflammatories:** Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) prescribed by your vet help with pain and swelling.
- **Regenerative therapies:** Therapies such as **platelet-rich plasma (PRP)**, **stem cells**, or **shockwave therapy** are used in some cases. These are becoming increasingly popular in equine practice but are more costly and may not be necessary in all cases.
- **Farriery:** Corrective shoeing can help balance the foot and reduce strain on the injured structure.
- **Physiotherapy:** Laser, ultrasound therapy, or controlled stretching under professional guidance.

Recovery can be slow. It can often take 6 to 12 months, sometimes longer for suspensory ligament injuries. A full return to previous performance level is not always guaranteed. Regular reassessment and monitoring with ultrasound scans help guide the rehabilitation plan.

The outlook for tendon and ligament injuries varies. Many horses return

to light or moderate work, but a full return to top-level performance is less certain. Recurrence rates for injuries can be high, especially in racehorses. Suspensory ligament injuries often carry a poorer prognosis compared to superficial flexor tendon injuries.

Complications can include:

- Chronic thickening or scar tissue, which reduces flexibility.
- Permanent reduction in performance ability.
- Re-injury of the same structure, especially if the workload is increased too quickly

Can it be prevented?

Not all tendon and ligament injuries can be prevented, but careful management reduces risk:

- **Good fitness:** Build up exercise gradually and avoid sudden increases in workload.
- **Appropriate terrain/surface choice:** Avoid very hard, deep, or slippery ground.
- **Appropriate warm-up and cool-down:** Stretching muscles and tendons before and after work helps reduce strain.
- **Correct farriery:** Balanced trimming and shoeing are essential to reduce uneven loading.
- **Weight management:** Keeping your horse at a healthy weight reduces stress on limbs.
- **Listen to your horse:** Any swelling, heat or subtle change in performance should be checked early by your vet. Prompt action gives the best chance of recovery.

What do I need to look out for?

Tendonitis and desmitis are common causes of lameness in horses,

especially those in athletic work. While treatment and recovery can be long, modern veterinary care combined with a structured rehabilitation plan gives many horses a good chance of returning to their previous activity. Prevention through thoughtful management, fitness, and foot care remains the best strategy.

If you notice any swelling, lameness, or heat in your horse's legs, it's always safest to contact your vet straight away.