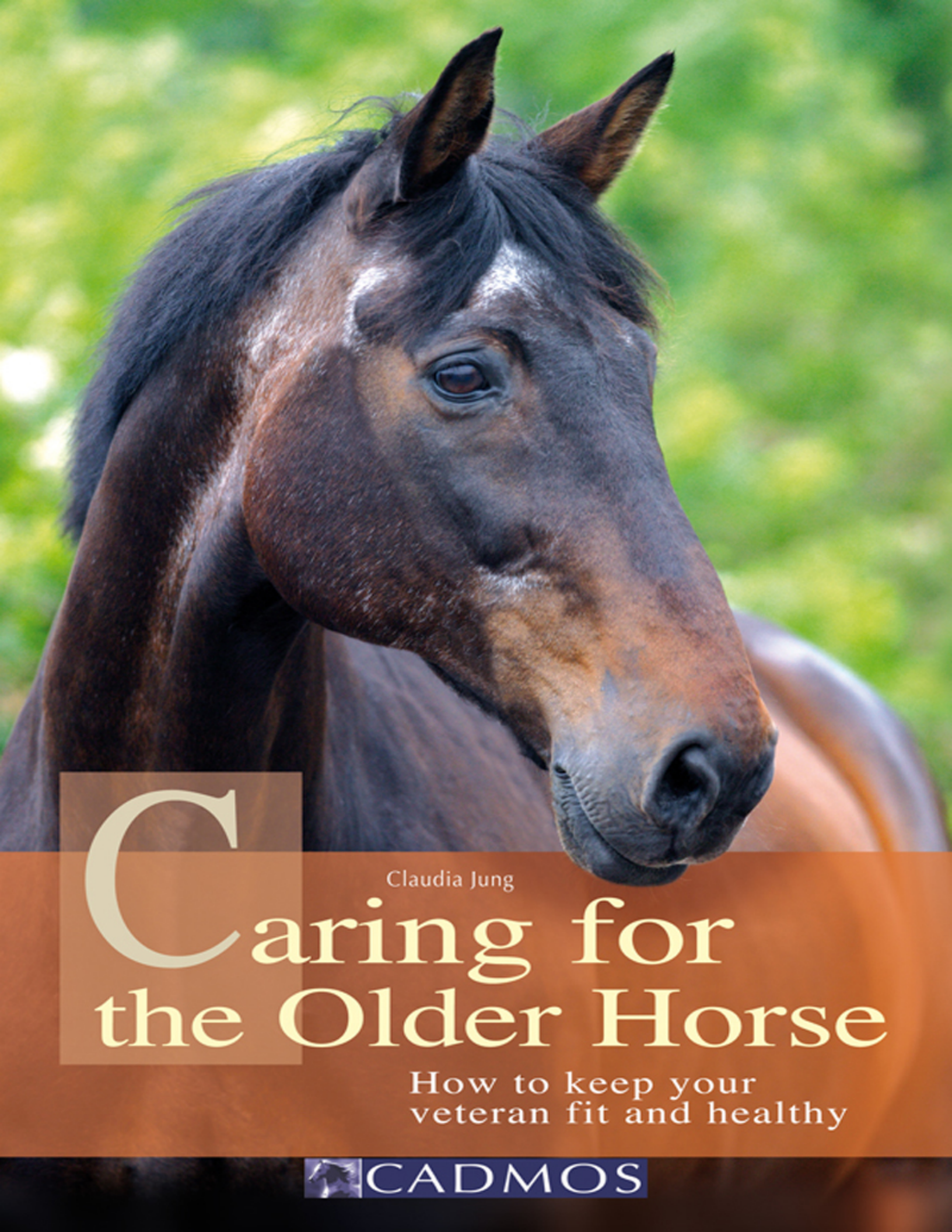




Claudia Jung

Caring for the Older Horse

How to keep your
veteran fit and healthy



CADMOS

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Introduction

At the beginning of my training as an animal physiotherapist, my own horse often acted as the trial subject when I was practising massage. After I had further improved my abilities and my horse had learned to recognise the advantages of an owner who had the ability to massage, I was asked by an increasing number of horse owners if I could massage their horses as well. They remarked on the fact that my horse always looking so relaxed and, by the way, they had an older horse standing about which they didn't really know what to do with any more. But surely massage would do no harm.

That way I received my first older horses as patients. Many of these 'oldies' remained with me for many years and were provided with massages by their owners at regular intervals. Their quality of life improved considerably. I showed the owners certain exercises and they thus suddenly had something they could perform together with their horse. They enjoyed the new experience and those rare moments in time when the feeling of 'well-being' was the most important thing. I, on the other hand, was astounded time and time again by how fit most of the old horses became over time. Almost all senior horses enjoy magnetic field and thermal treatments, and massages in particular. Often an almost meditative calm is created between man/woman and horse. I left such treatment sessions with a positive feeling of well-being and looked forward to the next session.

If the trainer has the opportunity to accompany older horses over a considerable length of time, he/she also learns that each horse reacts differently to developing age-related infirmities. Some horses are perfectly capable of turning the situation to their advantage if they can no

longer see or hear properly. It is, after all, difficult to ascertain how advanced such an impairment has become. Therefore the owner tends to treat an older horse with greater care. An owner who feels insecure in what to do often permits certain types of behaviour that would not have been acceptable in the past and would quite often have been punished. Many horses realise this very quickly and use this insecurity to their advantage. In many cases, the 'veteran' will only have to do a minimal amount of work and will receive large amounts of titbits for making this small effort. The owner simply rejoices in the fact that his/her old horse is still in such good condition, and allows it to get away with all manner of misbehaviour without feeling guilty.

If you only get to know a horse in the latter period of its life, it is quite possible that you will be present at its death. Over the years, I have accompanied many older horses on their last journey. If the horse has signalled its pleasure at seeing the therapist at every massage appointment, it can be difficult to say farewell. Animal physiotherapy has its limitations here; it is possible to significantly improve the quality of life, but it is impossible to achieve immortality. What the horse owner is left with is many wonderful memories – of long hacks, joint success at shows and gymkhanas or other activities, which forged the partnership between the horse and human being.

Therefore, you should not start to neglect your equine partner when it gets older – and this is one of the reasons why this book was written. It is designed to show you ways to retain your older horse's joie de vivre for as long as possible. The reward is calmness, peace, intimacy, but also, in particular, the special strength which older horses are able to give us. I wish you and your 'veteran' a wonderful time. If you have questions or have collected positive experiences, please do not hesitate to contact me on the website www.tierphysiotherapie-berlin.de.

I would like to thank all those who have helped me transform the idea of writing a book about older horses into reality. I would particularly like to thank Dr Kathrin Irgang and Klaus Lübker, who proofread the text and provided me with their extensive expert knowledge regarding the correct feeding of horses.

Claudia Jung
August 2008

Signs of ageing

Growing old is not an illness, but rather a completely normal change of the physiological state of well-being! In the case of humans, diverse theories are put forward as to why the ageing process starts earlier in some people than in others. Scientists, for example, have identified certain genes which trigger or accelerate the ageing process.

This, however, is only one part of the process that leads to ageing in any living being. For human beings, the best way to remain fit and healthy is to have a good lifestyle with balanced nutrition and plenty of exercise. For horses, these principles are pretty much the same.



(Photo: Slawik)

When is a horse considered to be old?

Several factors play an important role in the ageing process of horses:

- genetic predisposition
- nutrition
- rearing conditions
- environmental conditions



This 30-year-old Warmblood mare certainly does not look her age. (Photo: Jung)

Important deficits in, for example, the nutrition of a mare in foal, or during the first few years of the foal's life, cannot be made good in later years. The term 'environmental conditions' not only encompasses the way the horse is kept, but also its state of (lasting) stress, and whether the horse is asked to perform too much or too little, both physically and mentally.

It is therefore impossible to say, with complete certainty, when a horse is old. A year in the life of the horse equates approximately to three years in a human's: that means a 20-year-old mature horse is approximately 60 human years old. Depending on the way one looks at these things, one could maybe speak of old age here. It is, however, the case that some horses appear old even when they are still relatively young, whereas other horses still seem young even in old age. This is dependent on the above-mentioned factors.

If we approach the subject of ageing from the point of view of traditional Chinese medicine, we would first consider the three building blocks of life: Yin (essence), Qi (energy) and Shen (mind). These are so precious and indispensable that they are called the 'Three Treasures' in China. They always need to be kept or brought into balance, so that the body and mind are in harmony. Yin gives structure to all organic life. It is the prerequisite or in other words the root of life. It is the energy of growth and change. Yin is divided into pre-natal and post-natal Yin. The pre-natal Yin is delivered through the parents and contains all individual growth information. It is used up and balanced through the post-natal Yin. This Yin is responsible for the endocrine system, growth and the sexual maturing process, but also for the brain. Yin gives us vitality and determines our ability to recover from any illness.

Qi is responsible for the short-term cycles, for example, for breathing and digestion. Any lack of it is signified

through tiredness, exhaustion and shortness of breath. Yin and Qi form the basis for Shen. If they are strong, the power of the Shen also becomes visible. It is said that one can see the Shen of a person through their personality and through the expression of the eyes.

When the body is no longer able to produce Yin, it dies. The rhythm of Yin is the natural process of development and decline. The decline can be accelerated through adopting an incorrect way of life (nutrition, stress), or can be slowed down through a particularly careful conduct of life.

This is an extremely simplified representation of the ageing process from the viewpoint of traditional Chinese medicine. Even here, the important things are what your parents supply you with and the conditions of life that influence its consumption.

Musculature

The musculature forms the active part of the locomotive system. Amongst other things it is responsible for forward motion; it takes over a part of the burden of the body and in addition takes part in the maintenance of balance in any being.

With age, a horse's muscles grow weaker and lose mass. On the one hand, this results from a reduced mobility of older horses, on the other presumably from an age-related change of the vascular system. These changes lead to a limited supply of blood to the skeletal musculature. Using the hindquarters as an example, muscular weakness has the effect that very older horses are able to get up only with difficulty, or not at all. Older horses, therefore, often don't lie down anymore, or only when they know that a human is present to help them get up. Some older horses also develop their own system for getting up, by first 'sitting on

their bum', waiting for a moment to gather enough strength, and then getting up with a swinging motion.

Not only can you see the state of the muscles, but you can also feel it. Good musculature feels powerful but also flexible. If the horse lacks musculature, the flesh feels soft and spongy; tense musculature on the other hand feels rock hard. It requires a bit of practice until you can properly assess the state of the musculature of a horse you are treating. It therefore makes sense to compare the feel of different horses in order to be able to judge the state of your own horse more competently.



Lack of exercise leads to a deterioration of the back and abdominal muscles – a hollowed-out back is the result. (Photo: Slawik)

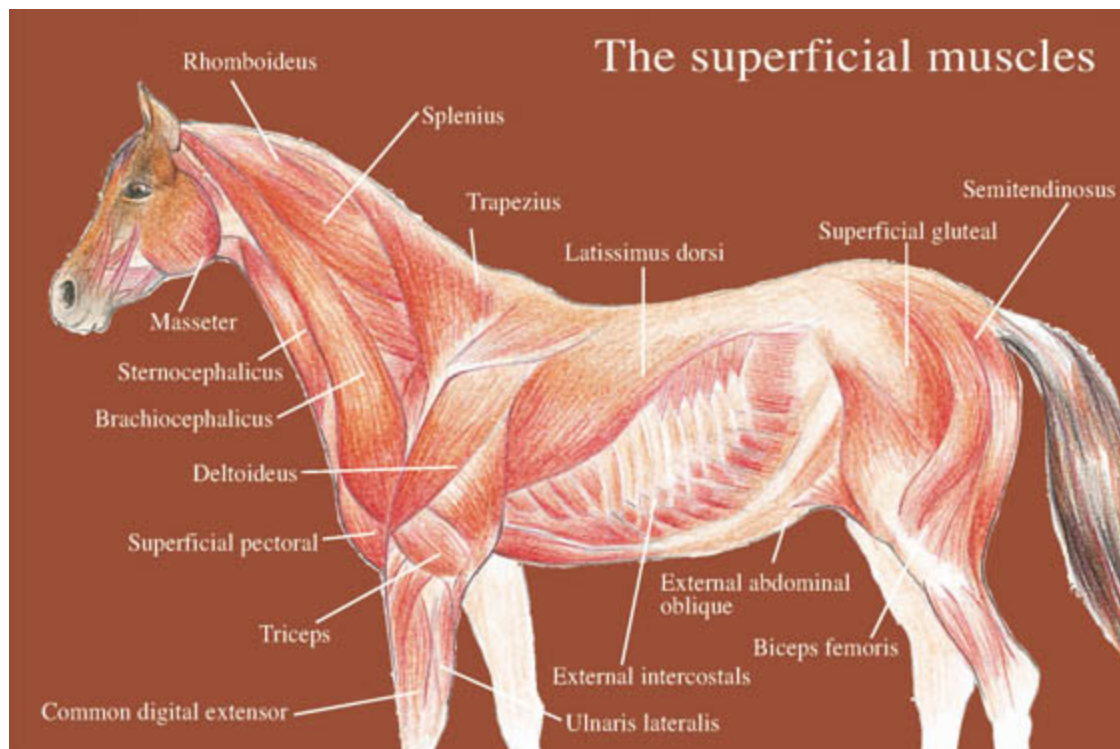
Recent studies in humans have revealed that regular power training slows down the decline of the muscles and improves their strength. Under the assumption that the muscles of the horse act in a similar way, training needs to be adjusted to the needs of the older horse and continued regularly.

In the event that this is not possible because of illness, the musculature goes into decline; the older horse looks gaunt

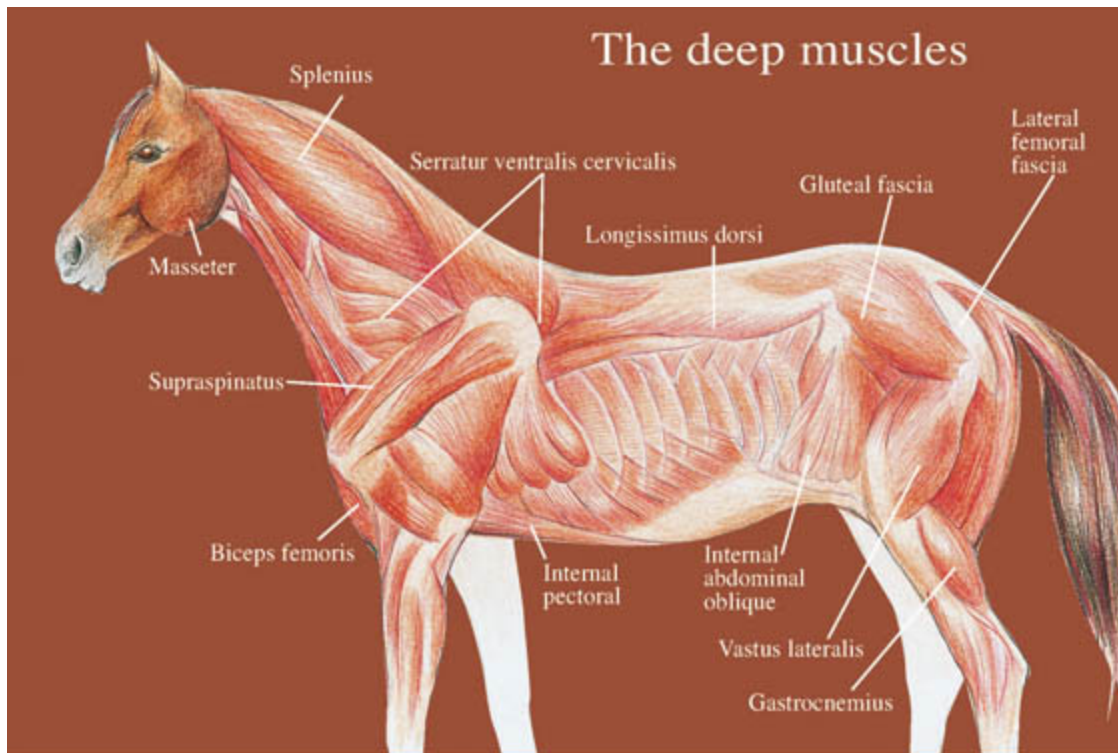
and bony. In the case of a lack of movement this occurs amongst other places in the region of the back and abdomen, and leads to a hollowed-out back and a hanging abdomen.

You will recognise good back muscles through the fact that the long back muscle (*longissimus dorsi*) fills out the flanks well and frames the spine evenly on both sides. If the back muscles are particularly well developed, the long back muscle even rises slightly above the spine. Defective muscles are defined by a back muscle which is flat or has even sunk below the spine, and the spine is raised prominently not only in the front where the saddle lies, but also in the area of the flanks.

The muscles of the abdominal area ensure that the flanks are round and well filled. The four abdominal muscles (straight abdominal muscle, internal and external oblique abdominal muscles and the transverse abdominal muscle) form a contracting girdle, which is able to adapt itself to the weight and volume of the internal organs. Well-trained abdominal muscles under stress offer a counter pressure to the back muscles because they carry the trunk, which therefore does not hang from the spine.



You will recognise good back muscles through the fact that the long back muscle (longissimus dorsi) fills out the flanks well and frames the thoracic spine evenly on both sides. The abdominal muscles form a contractile carrying belt, which is able to adapt itself to the weight and volume of the internal organs.
(Illustrations: Denmann)



In equine circles there is a saying: 'No abdomen, no back'. Accordingly, our training and exercise programme should always have the goal of building up or maintaining the abdominal muscles. This does not only apply to older horses, by the way, but to horses of all ages. You will find practical exercises for this [onwards](#).

Tendons, ligaments and joints

Functional abnormalities in the tendons, ligaments and joints (here predominantly arthrosis) lead to pain and restricted mobility.

Idleness leads to stagnation: the less older horses are exercised, the stiffer they become.

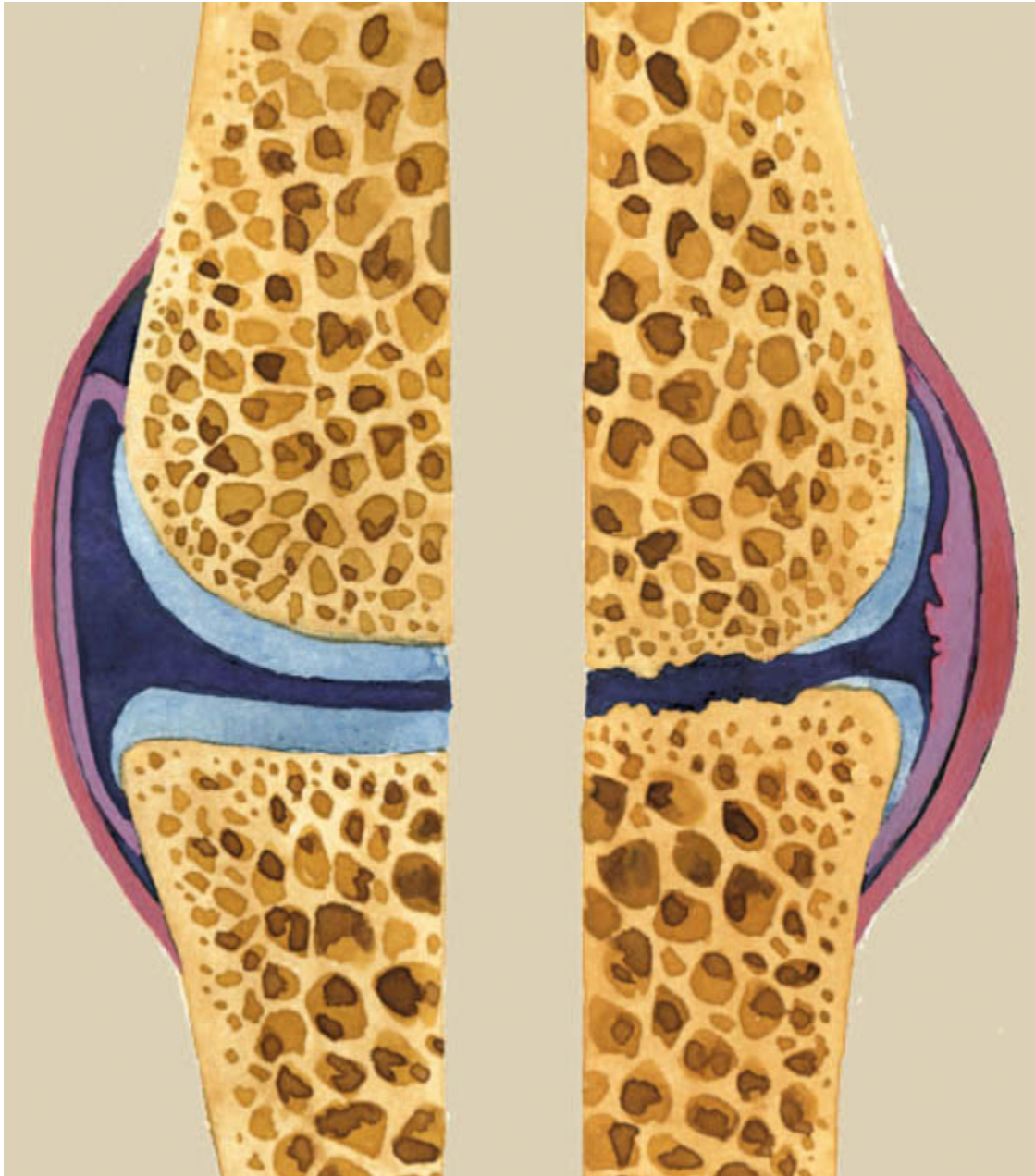
Ligaments are found on the inside as well as the outside of the joints. Apart from providing flexibility, their task is also

stabilisation. The tendons connect muscles and bones, and allow muscles to have an effect at a distance. Like the ligaments, they consist of firm connective tissue made from very fine fibres, the so-called fibrils.

Tendons, ligaments and the joints lose their elasticity in the older horse; the fibres wear out, which increases the risk of accidents due to twisting or overuse. This needs to be considered during the training and mobility programme.

What is arthrosis?

Arthrosis is a term used to describe the reduction of the cartilage tissues in the joints and calcification at their edges. The cartilage ensures that, at the mobile connection of two or more bones, these do not rub against each other. In addition, it forms a buffer, which absorbs impacts and thereby protects the ends of the bones. The synovial fluid supplies the cartilage with important nutrients. It is found in the articular capsule, which holds the joint together.



In a healthy joint, the cartilage (light blue) is smooth, is well supplied and able to absorb impacts. When the cartilage changes (on the right), the results are inflammation and pain, and later additional bone growth. The cartilage is no longer able to absorb impacts. (Drawing: Mähler)

In healthy joints the cartilage ends are smooth and well supplied by the synovial fluid. In the case of arthrosis, the circulation in the joint changes through vasculitis and swelling. This leads to the synovial fluid becoming diluted, and it is no longer able to supply the cartilage sufficiently.