

BISPHOSPHONATES: A guide for purchasers.

Bisphosphonates are a class of drugs licensed for use in navicular disease and hock joint arthritis. They are also used by some veterinarians for other bone related conditions. The drug binds to bone and acts to reduce bone remodelling and has an added potential benefit as a painkiller. An effect of the drug binding to the bone is that it may be detected at variable levels in blood and urine samples for many months or even years after the drug has been administered. There is some evidence that this may be related to exercise levels due to increase in the natural turnover of bone with high intensity exercise.

Given the mode of action of the drug, and using information from studies in other species, there are concerns that there may be inhibition of the natural conditioning process of bone remodelling that occurs in young horses and that this may lead to increased injury rates. This along with the drugs potential benefit as a painkiller for bone related issues has led to the use of this class of drug being banned or heavily restricted in young horses in many racing jurisdictions.

Though there is currently a lack of data substantiating the link between the drugs use in young horses and injury rates, it should be noted that, their use as a painkiller means that they clearly should not be being used in the context of any sale or in any proximity to racing. More research is urgently required to help our understanding of the long term effects of the drugs use in horses.

Current regulations relating to bisphosphonates (see link to BHA notice):

7.2 A horse must not have been administered any bisphosphonates:

7.2.1 before the horse is aged three years and six months, or

7.2.2 on raceday or any of the 30 clear days before

Any horse which is administered bisphosphonates under the age of three years and six months is permanently ineligible to race in Great Britain.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of alignment between different racing jurisdictions, and the drugs long and potentially variable excretion, the current regulations for bisphosphonates (see above) mean that owners purchasing yearlings and other youngstock may be at risk of breaching BHA anti-doping rules.

In the UK, bisphosphonates have been a prohibited substance in young horses since 2017. As such, horses bred and reared in the UK are unlikely to have received the drug. However, where no such regulations are in place, there is an increased chance of a purchase having received the drug prior to a sale. If this horse then runs and tests positive for bisphosphonates in the UK it will receive a lifetime ban.

This is obviously of significant concern for owners purchasing horse overseas and we have brought together some relevant information below to help owners reduce the risk of having a positive test.

A number of sales companies have recently amended their conditions of sales to allow a horse to be returned to the vendor if it tests positive for bisphosphonates. It should be noted that because of the unusual characteristics of the drug there is a possibility that a horse could potentially test negative on a blood test and then subsequently test positive on a blood or urine test. However, this is hypothetical and there is currently no evidence that this has occurred to date.

Sales companies that have returns policies for bisphosphonates include:

- Keenland Company – BHA Badge (approved) testing.
- Fasig -Tipton Company
- Ocala Breeders' Sales
- Tattersalls – BHA Badge (approved) testing.
- Magic Millions
- Inglis
- Goffs UK (Expected)
- Arquana (Expected)
- Baden Baden (Expected)

The costs of testing are paid for by the purchaser. These can be significant. In America the cost is c.\$500. Costs revert to the vendor if a positive is detected.

Global Regulation

Following the UK's rule change many countries now have regulations in place against the use of bisphosphonates in racing. In the majority of countries (as per the UK rules above) this is age related, advancing significant penalties for their use in young horses. Although, horses may still test positive if purchased in countries where age related regulations are in place, it should be less likely given the increased awareness of the penalties and issues surrounding this drug class.

In countries where there are not age related regulations in place there is not the same strong disincentive against their use and there is the potential for increased use in youngstock being prepared for sales. As more racing authorities put age related restrictions in place the risk of purchasing a horse that will subsequently test positive to bisphosphonates abroad should reduce.

Countries whose racing authorities have age related regulations in place for the use of bisphosphonates:

Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Cyprus, Germany, Hong Kong, Iran, Ireland, Korea, Lebanon, Macau, Malaysia, Mauritius, Morocco, Norway, Oman, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Turkey and USA.

Countries whose racing authorities have regulation in place but are not currently age related.

France

Ireland
Norway
Sweden

Permanent Import Testing

Another factor to consider is the permanent import testing rules for importing racehorses into the UK. They state that “any horse that is permanently imported into Great Britain must have a sample collected, and have that sample reported as negative, before it is eligible to race in Britain”. The following countries are currently exempt from these rules: France, Ireland, Germany, Hong Kong, Sweden & Norway.

To assist overseas buyers BHA Badge testing (approved testing) is available from the following sales which allows horses to be tested at the point of sale prior to import into the UK:

Keenland, USA
Arquana, France (Expected)

This regulation means that any horse imported from non-exempt countries will have to have had a blood sample taken prior to racing in the UK and so, to get results as soon as possible and potentially tie in with sales companies returns policies, BHA badge testing at the sales should be taken advantage of where possible.

Despite there being no requirement, purchasers of horses in exempt countries should also strongly consider testing horses. Particularly, in those countries (listed above) that do not currently have age related regulations in place for the use of bisphosphonates in racing.

Elective Testing

Owners and trainers are also able to perform elective testing for bisphosphonates by contacting equine@britishhorseracing.com

More information about the procedure is available at:

<https://www.britishhorseracing.com/regulation/anti-doping-medication-control/prohibited-substances/>

Summary

- When buying horses overseas, until there is improved regulatory alignment across racing jurisdictions, testing should be carefully considered for any horse destined for racing in the UK.
- A negative test taken at the time of purchase will significantly reduce the likelihood of a future positive test that may lead to a ban.

- Be familiar with the conditions of sales at each sale you attend. Are the horses returnable with a positive test? What are the notification periods to allow a return to take place?
- Caution should be taken purchasing bloodstock where there is disparity in the regulations with the UK. Where this occurs, assurances should be sought that the lots have not received treatment with bisphosphonates prior to the sale.
- Further research is needed to inform the debate about their safety and welfare implications in British racing.

Further reading:

BHA Notice: Bisphosphonates Update 2019