

Drug Withholding for Equine Competition

I'm sure you have all heard of drug testing in sports. It seems all too frequent, that we hear of an athlete being caught taking a banned substance. The main aim in human testing is to prevent unfair advantage being gained by one athlete over a rival.

Similar testing regimes also exist in the animal sporting world. Whilst it is still the aim of the animal sport testing bodies, to maintain a level playing field for all competitors, it is also strongly aimed at maintaining high animal welfare standards. So even simple anti-inflammatories cannot be given close to competition dates, for fear they may be being used to mask a serious injury.

As veterinarians we need to be aware of administering medications which may still be in their system at the time of competition, even though they may be well below therapeutic levels, and administered for a perfectly legitimate reason.

To assist us, we rely on information supplied to us listing detection times and medication withholding times. These are estimates of how long it takes for a drug level to fall below a detectable limit, and then a buffer of one or more days is added to give a suggested withholding time.

Recently there has been a substantial increase in the withholding and detection times on many of the medications we use. Some have been extended quite considerably and some have been banned altogether; meaning we should not be administering them at all, no matter what the withholding data is. So called natural remedies such as Devils claw, Belladonna and Arnica are not exempt and appear on the list.

Some drugs, especially those naturally occurring in the body, have a level above which they are not allowed.

So if you are competing a horse and have been prescribed medications in the past which you are still using, it would be a good idea to check with the clinic to see if there has been any change to the withholding time. It needs to be highlighted, that withholding times are not a legal excuse for a positive test. Even if you have adhered to all recommended advice, if a test is positive, it is positive!