



## AU NATUREL

### Is there a natural alternative to bute?

By Toby Raymond

Phenylbutazone, “bute,” is about the most reached-for anti-inflammatory medication on the shelf when it comes to treating swelling. It is practical-

ly a given for the horse with a fever or in pain, or that suffers from arthritis. But don't be fooled; just because bute is readily available and user-friendly, like all meds, it should be used sparingly and with caution.

As a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID), bute can have the same side effects as other NSAIDs, including the possibility of its becoming addictive. In addition, overdose or prolonged use can cause gastrointestinal and kidney damage, oral lesions, and internal hemorrhaging, particularly in young, ill, or stressed horses. Not to mention that it may remain in the bloodstream for up to five days, a major violation of many show regulations. And, recent research has shown that bute potentially inhibits the production of joint cartilage and can delay bone healing, as it interferes with thyroid function.

And the cautions continue. Bute should not be given to horses that have a history of bleeding disorders or have a pre-existing gastrointestinal ulcer condition. Then, there are the potential problems arising from combining bute with other meds, such as Banamine or blood thinners like aspirin, because it can intensify the anticoagulant effects of the drugs.

But, before you throw out all the jars and syringes, the cautions don't mean that you should never use it. They simply mean you should use bute judiciously. In situations where acute inflammation and pain are present, bute can be a powerful ally. And, when used properly and for a relatively short amount of time—three to seven days for acute or new problems or flare-ups—bute is quite effective.

What to do if the horses in your care are in need of long term pain management? There are alternatives. Medicinal herbs have provided relief and promoted healing throughout history. In many cases, it is the anti-inflammatory and pain relieving properties of herbs that are at the core of our most advanced medicines, but often without the side effects.

A growing number of herbal-based companies are offering products to address the needs of horses, but keep in mind that even though they are extracted from natural sources, there are always risks



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when administering medication, particularly if you're in the process of transitioning away from synthetics.

Hawthorn, feverfew and ginger, for instance, can influence blood clotting time, which can have adverse effects when combined with bute. So, before making a switch, become familiar with some of the common medicinals.

Take Devils Claw—*Harpagophytum procumbens*. The two active ingredients, Harpagoside and Betasitosterol, are considered key to the anti-inflammatory properties Devils Claw is claimed to possess. It also is said to improve joint mobility and help to alleviate arthritis-caused pain.



But, on the downside, Devils Claw has the potential to interfere with cardiovascular meds, including aspirin, and can promote the secretion of stomach acid, leading to difficulties in those with ulcers.

Then there's white willow bark — *Salix alba*. Referred to as nature's aspirin, its active ingredient is salicin and has been used in Chinese medicine for centuries. Invaluable for helping to reduce fever and manage pain, White willow bark is also known to lessen inflammation without causing

stomach upsets often associated with aspirin. But again, white willow bark is not recommended for horses with chronic gastrointestinal conditions.

Another common alternative for treating arthritis symptoms, Yucca— whose common species include *Yucca aloifolia* (Spanish bayonet), *Y. brevifolia* (Joshua tree), *Y. filamentosa* (Adam's needle), and *Y. glauca* (soap-weed)—has been a mainstay in Native American medicine for hundreds of years. Containing steroidal saponins which are respected for their potential anti-cholesterol, anti-inflammatory, and anti-carcinogenic activities, and marketed today as a dietary supplement, there are also indications that yucca may help reduce blood pressure as well.

Comfrey—*Symphytum officinale* —has traditionally been used to treat wounds and reduce inflammation due to the allantoin it contains in its roots and leaves. Research has shown that the substance promotes wound healing and tissue regeneration, so as a result, comfrey is influential in the treatment of arthritis, and gastric ulcers.





However, with all its therapeutic benefits, comfrey is also considered by many as a controversial herb that contributes to liver toxicity. Comfrey taken internally should be viewed with caution, although dosage levels typically are at a much lower rate than those used for research purposes.



In the end, when used in proper proportions, each of these remedies can provide a safe treatment. As with any medication, though, consult a professional beforehand.

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