

Back care advice with Top tips

How to manage back health and prevent problems

Anyone who has suffered from back problems will know how painful they can be and the horse's back is equally vulnerable to injury and muscular strains that can have an adverse effect on the animal's performance and temperament. By looking after your horse's back you can help to prevent many problems.

Structure of the Horse's Back

The key component of a horse's back is the spine and the conformation of the spine can be an important factor in the horse staying sound, healthy and free of back pain, even when competing at a high level.



The spine or vertebral column consists of seven cervical vertebra (including the atlas and axis), 18 thoracic vertebra, six lumbar vertebra, five sacral vertebra (fused) and 18-25 coccygeal or tail vertebra.

The spine is a rigid structure, with the most flexible parts being the neck and the tail. The flexible neck supports the relatively heavy head of the horse and allows for grazing and also largely assists in balance. The tail needs to be flexible to provide the horse with a means of swishing away flies, as well as for balance.

Through the back of the horse there is little flexibility between the individual thoracic and lumbar vertebra, but when viewed collectively there is the ability of flexion ('rounding' of the back), extension ('hollowing' of the back) and lateral bending (side to side). The joints between each vertebra are either slightly moveable or in some cases immovable. The fibro cartilaginous discs between the vertebra allow for the absorption of concussion produced by movement.

The highest point of the back is at the withers, and a prominent wither ensures that the saddle will stay in place. The long dorsal spinous processes of the withers provide the site for attachment of muscles that support the head, neck and the forelimbs. The lumbar vertebra have large transverse spinous processes for muscle attachments. The fused vertebra that form the sacrum help to support the hindlimbs by way of their attachment through the pelvis and associated muscles.

Strong muscles are required to support the back. The large, superficial back muscles (eg the longissimus dorsi muscle) span a large area of the spine and allow coordinated back movements. The deep back muscles (eg multifidi) are smaller muscles connecting between one or two vertebra, acting to move or stabilise the individual vertebra. In addition, the spinal ligaments connect individual vertebra and provide joint support. The horse's spine is held under tension by the abdominal muscles.

The correct development of the 'topline' muscles ensures the necessary strength and flexibility required to support the weight of a rider and to allow the movement between the vertebral joints in the thoracic and lumbar spine that is necessary in the athletic horse.

Some muscular and soft tissue problems in the back can be secondary symptoms to a problem elsewhere in the body such as in the lower limbs. Unevenness in the horse's gait may lead to him compensating and in doing so may put more strain on the structures of the back. In this situation veterinary diagnosis is required before treatment from any other health care professional.



Soft tissue problems are not the only cause of back pain. Skeletal problems such as 'kissing spines' or osteoarthritis are also a primary cause of back pain.

Avoiding back problems

The horse is not designed to carry weight, and that is why it is important to train your horse correctly so that he can strengthen the muscles that will help him take the weight of the rider. A correctly trained and ridden horse should have far fewer problems with his back than one that is not using the right muscles.

It is essential that your horse is physically suited for the job he is being asked to do. Many problems may also be caused by unfitness and so the horse must be fit enough for the work required of him.

As with any athlete it is vital that the horse's muscles are properly warmed up prior to exercise and cooled down afterwards to prevent soft tissue damage. This can eliminate many problems and prevent them occurring. Common problems like muscle strain can be caused by inadequate warm up.

The golden rule is to have the horse's back checked regularly and make sure that all tack is correctly fitted. Remember that poor dentistry and hoof care can also have a negative effect on the horse's back so it is essential to have his teeth checked regularly and to ensure he is properly and regularly shod by a registered farrier.

Poor behaviour or a decline in overall performance or way of going could indicate back trouble so before jumping to the conclusion that he is being naughty or lazy it is advisable to have his back checked by a vet who may recommend further treatment. Many horses in all disciplines have back problems, and it is up to the rider to try and prevent these from

occurring. The better you look after your horse's back, the more enjoyment you will get from him, and the longer his riding life will be.

Caring for your horse's back

Equine Sports Massage is the therapeutic application of professional sports massage techniques applied to the horse. A sports massage therapist has a thorough understanding of anatomy and the interaction of bones, joints and muscles. A masseur views the horse as a whole and considers all possible causes and effects of tension while interpreting a horse's reactions.

Remember to make sure that any person you use to check or treat your horse's back is fully qualified and insured and has your vet's consent. They should be a member of a recognised professional association such as ACPAT (The Association for Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy), MCA (McTimoney Chiropractic Association), MAA (McTimoney Animal Association) or ESMA (Equine Sports Massage Association).

For further information visit www.equinemassageassociation.co.uk or www.mctimoney-animal.org

Top Ten tips for Back Care

1. Make sure the horse is suited to the work it is being asked to do
2. Make sure the rider's style suits the horse's way of going
3. Make sure the horse is appropriately trained
4. Keep the horse's feet and shoes well maintained
5. Make sure the horse's bit is well fitted and not causing problems and have the horse's teeth regularly checked by a qualified equine dentist
6. Have the horse's saddle fitted by a registered saddle fitter to make sure it fits both horse and rider
7. Make sure that training aids are used appropriately
8. Make sure the horse is properly warmed up and cooled down prior to and post exercise
9. Make sure that the horse is worked on a suitable training surface
10. Finally, have your horse's back regularly checked by a fully qualified and insured practitioner approved by your vet