

Back Problems & Neck Problems in Horses
ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE
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BACK & NECK PROBLEMS IN HORSES

What is it?

Back problems can be extremely disabling for a horse. Problems can vary from simple soreness, with sensitivity to pressure, through spinal and pelvic misalignments to a full-blown injury. There may or may not be chronic pathology. Accompanying this will be a varying degree of disability and abnormal movement.

You can recognise back problems by your horse's reaction to grooming, saddling and manual pressure. He may not have a symmetrical hind limb action and his tail may be held to one side. He may hold his head too high in work or even lift his head sharply during upward transitions. Some horses will climb up the banking in a stable, with their hind legs, presumably to obtain some relief, or 'sit' upon the manger or window ledge. It is usually difficult for the horse to stand 'square', when the back is wrong. Neck problems can often be recognised through abnormal head movement or aversion responses, by observing excessive sensitivity at the poll or by neck muscle spasm and shoulder misalignment.

The existence of equine back problems appears to have been largely ignored or denied by the veterinary profession, over the years. More recently, however, one particular pathology has now been officially recognised. It is '[kissing spines](#)'. This condition represents only a small proportion of actual back problems and is happily more reversible in suitable cases, through special exercises combined with natural medicine, than is commonly thought.

How does it occur?

Among the common causes of back problems are injury, [saddling problems](#), [shoeing problems](#), unsuitable numnah design, incorrect rug fit and sudden uncoordinated movement or falling, particularly if the horse skids or saves

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himself from falling, with a snatching movement. Kissing spines can result from long-term avoidance responses to chronic back pain, by repeatedly back-dipping. Unsuitable saddling is the most likely cause of this problem.

Does it matter?

Back pain is very unpleasant for the horse, making it vital that something should be done about it, as soon as possible. It is a welfare issue. The [pain](#) itself must be addressed. Apart from the pain, the way the horse compensates for the problem can lead to serious secondary injury. If there is a lower neck problem, this can often appear as a fore limb lameness problem. If the [pelvis is misaligned](#), for instance, one hind leg is favoured. In the short term, the tendon of the diagonal fore-limb is at great risk, during strenuous work. All the horses treated for tendon strain, by the AVMC, have shown pelvic misalignment. In the longer term, there will be greater concussive trauma to the bones and joints of the diagonal front limb. There will also, over a period, be changes in the way the whole musculo-skeletal system works, by way of compensation for the problem. This can lead to confusing 'layers' of problems.

Are there preventive measures to take?

Avoidance of back problems is best achieved by careful saddling, sympathetic riding, static spinal exercises, regular pole-work in-hand, careful correctly-balanced shoeing and attention to rug and numnah design. Rubber matting in the stable or deep litter bedding make slipping less likely, as the horse rises from rolling.

Is it responsive to treatment?

The conventional response to kissing spines and sometimes to more general back pain is to use anti-inflammatory agents. These will sometimes reduce symptoms but the disease will persist unless supporting back work is performed.

In any back problem, proper resolution cannot take place, however, until any spinal or pelvic misalignments are corrected (e.g. by McTimoney Chiropractic-type methodology or osteopathic techniques). Inevitably, misalignment leads to incorrect movement and to abnormal stresses and strains being put on other parts of the body.

There is some skepticism, among conventional vets, about the validity of spinal manipulation but it only has to be witnessed, for it to be credited with belief.

The AVMC performs [chiropractic manipulation](#) work, alongside [osteopathy](#), [acupuncture](#), [LASER](#), [homeopathy](#) and individualised [saddling](#) and [shoeing](#)

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advice, as necessary. Advice is also given on therapeutic and preventive static or dynamic exercise programmes. This integrated approach is usually enough to correct most back problems but is rarely an immediate fix, since many of the problems we meet have been in existence for a considerable period.

Back People

There are many 'back people' who ply their trade. Animal-qualified chiropractors are examined by the McTimoney Chiropractic Association. These are genuine. Of those without this qualification, some will be genuine but caution is advised in using someone without the qualification. Some back people are dangerous. Physiotherapists work on the musculature, which can be very valuable in suitable cases, once back misalignments have been corrected, but most appear not to acknowledge spinal misalignment.

All chiropractors, osteopaths, physiotherapists and other manipulators are required, by the [Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966](#), to work only on the recommendation of a vet and under the supervision of a vet.

Gadgets

Many pieces of equipment are recommended, by salespersons or practitioners, for back problems. [Ultra-sound](#), [LASER](#), [Magnet](#), Faradic and TENS are but a few of these. Before embarking on such programmes, which can be expensive quite apart from safety considerations, be sure to consult your vet, to enquire about suitability or safety for your particular horse.

See also:

<http://www.chiropracticvet.co.uk>

<http://www.equineacupuncturevet.co.uk>

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