

- Ill-fitting tack and blankets
- Compensatory problems

Horses, like humans, are prone to fatigue. Under ideal conditions, the back muscles carry the rider's weight. Once fatigue sets in, the muscles weaken and drop, thereby putting additional strain on the spinal column and its associated structures. The back muscles become taut and tense. If the cycle is repeated, chronic back pain sets in.

Any physical ailment brings with it compensatory issues. For example, when there is a chronic hock problem, the horse will adjust his movement to alleviate the pain. This in turn puts additional strain directly on other areas, with the lumbar or loin region being the primary target for compensatory strain because it's the pivotal point of the horse's back.

Six tips for preventing and resolving back issues

As a rider, you can take measures to prevent putting stress and strain on an already compromised area of your horse's back.

1 First and foremost, always use a mounting block to prevent pulling vertebrae out of alignment.

2 An adequate warm-up is essential. It takes roughly 15 minutes for muscles to be warmed up enough to withstand the workloads we ask of our horses. Be sure to allow your horse to walk freely with his head and neck stretched down, and incorporate suppling and flexibility exercises, as well as lateral work and circles, before you launch into a schooling routine.

3 Along with your warm-up, a proper cool down is just as important. Allow another 15-minute walk after your riding session. Hacks are a great way for your horse to warm up and cool down both physically and mentally.

4 A regular regimen of stretches can help ready the muscles for the task ahead. Although stretching looks and sounds easy, a lot can go wrong with a "simple stretch". It is your responsibility to learn how to do the job right, both for your safety and the horse's health.

5 Hydrotherapy can be hugely beneficial when treating muscle and joint pain (see Equine Wellness, V5I5).


6 When a muscle's overall health is compromised, it is imperative that you take immediate action to prevent further damage. Massage therapy involves specific



If your horse pins his ears, swishes his tail, kicks out when you do up his girth and/or drop his back to avoid your touch during grooming, he is trying to tell you something.



manipulation techniques to help maintain optimal muscle health. As a Registered Equine Massage Therapist, I have yet to treat a horse with a problem that doesn't ultimately show up in his back. Massage therapy plays an important and necessary role in preventing and treating many soft tissue injuries that could result in a horse being labeled "cold backed". A qualified equine massage therapist will be able to structure a care program that addresses your horse's individual needs.

There are no easy answers when it comes to the health of your horse, but there are many options to choose from. As an educated horse person, you can make informed choices about the type of care your horse requires. Read up on the literature, ask questions and choose your professional caregivers wisely. 

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