

Massage therapy for the horse and rider

By Nancy Stein, LMT/CEMT

Muscles can affect the ability of both horse and rider to move naturally, correctly, and without pain. They can make a lesson, show, workout, trail ride or any other type of riding a pleasure or a disaster. Most of us have lived one of these two scenarios;

First scenario:

Work is over for the day and you are looking forward to going to the barn to work your horse. It is stress relief for you, and one of your greatest pleasures. Once at the barn, you complete your grooming chores and go to the arena to lunge your horse before mounting (or, for those of us with no access to arenas, you watch your horse in the field, and see that he is moving well and freely with his buddies.) Your horse is moving well, his head is low, and he is moving forward with a loose, swinging stride. With his warm-up complete, you mount and begin your ride. You ask for a transition to trot, and your horse stiffens up his neck, hollows his back, comes above the bit and jumps into the trot. Repeated attempts to get a smooth transition do not go any better. The same problem shows up in canter transitions. He is stiff to one side, and will not bend at the barrel, trying to spin his hind quarters to the outside. What has happened to your nice supple horse?

Second scenario:

You get to the barn, do your chores, and begin to lunge your horse. He is fine in the first direction, with his eye a bit toward the center of the circle, carrying his head nicely level, and rounded in the body, tracking up well. You change direction, and everything looks different. His head and neck are twisted to the outside of the circle, his haunches are coming to the inside of the circle, and he refuses his canter lead. Once you mount, no amount of bending exercise helps loosen him to the bad side. Forcing the issue just makes it worse, resulting in refusals, pinned ears and wringing tail. You settle for one good transition from walk to trot, and quit for the night, frustrated.

In the first case, the horse is ready for a good workout, but the rider is not. Due to stress, injury or poor conditioning, the rider is stiff. It may be low back pain, not allowing the rider to move through the core; it may be shoulder or neck stiffness from sitting at a desk all day. In either case the rider is interfering with the movement of her horse. The horse can do nothing but respond to the stiffness and incorrect position of the rider.

In the second case, the horse has come out of its stall or pasture stiff and sore. A stiff neck, sore back, leg pain due to strain or sprain can all cause the problems described in scenario number two.

As riders we often forget that we are also athletes. We bring to our sport any and all physical problems that we may have, and our horse also brings his problems. Muscle pain and stiffness will affect any athlete, reducing their performance. Muscle problems in a rider can result in a horse hollowing his back in response to the rider's inability to move with him. Back, shoulder

diagonal movements.

If you find the above pictures reflect what you have been experiencing, massage therapy may be very helpful in correcting these problems. Because muscles have memory, once they shorten up due to stress or injury, they will stay that way. Through massage therapy, the therapist can interrupt this pattern, reset the nerves that are causing the shortening of the muscle tissue, and return the muscle to its full length. This can take multiple sessions since the muscle will attempt to return to its previous state until the memory is fully reset. What most of us do not realize is that a muscle is not one big chunk of tissue, but hundreds of tiny filaments. Each filament contracts and expands through nerve stimulation. If some of the filaments aren't getting the signal from the nerve, this results in what we think of as knots, or muscle spasms. Once enough of the filaments are involved, the muscle no longer relaxes as it should, creating stiffness and a shorter range of motion. Through therapy, muscles can be returned to their natural elasticity, allowing for freedom of movement. This keeps the rider from interfering with the horse, and allows the horse to move freely. Regular massage therapy for riders keeps the muscles loose so they have the greatest range of motion possible. This will allow the rider to move easily with the horse, and use their aids correctly. Muscle evaluation for the horse should be done on a regular basis to prevent problems from becoming chronic.

Once a horse has muscle problems that cause him pain, his reactions to the movements that cause the pain become a habit, and it is difficult to retrain the horse even though the pain may no longer be there. Evaluation of the horse can prevent muscle problems from becoming behavior problems. Working with both the horse and rider will provide the greatest benefit to their performance.

In looking for a therapist, be sure they are both a licensed massage therapist and a certified equine massage therapist. Both you and your horse deserve the best.



Iowa Ranch Horse Association action

Photo by Pete Conis

www.petconisphotography.com

and neck stiffness will prevent the rider from turning her body to aid the horse in bending. Leg problems will result in the horse moving off the leg aids differently on each side. Muscle problems in the horse include, but are not limited to, back soreness resulting in a hollow back and inability to track up or move on the bit. Neck stiffness will prevent nice bending into circles or

Nancy Stein is a Licensed Massage Therapist as well as a Certified Equine Massage Therapist. She offers a combined rider/horse evaluation service as well as massage therapy for horse and rider. Her experience with horses includes dressage training, president of the River Cities Dressage and Combined Training Club, twelve years' involvement with the Appaloosa Horse Club, and attendance at numerous dressage clinics as well as Appaloosa World and National shows.