



Poor riding and poor saddle fit can contribute to equine back injuries.

As was mentioned in a recent article in California Riding Magazine (Nov. 2016) concerning gullet channel width, the issue of kissing spine is something that is of concern to many riders – and is very closely related to this saddle fit issue. I have recently come across an inordinate amount of horses where this issue occurred and was, of course, not helped – indeed exacerbated – by poorly fitting saddles.



There are still differing opinions as to whether kissing spines is a disease with predilection already present at birth, or whether it is caused by “something” (poor saddle fit, poor riding, etc.) during the course of the horse’s life.

Dr. Carol Vischer, a DVM in New York, with whom I work occasionally, (and who has kindly written an insert for my book *Suffering in Silence*) has done extensive research and come to the conclusion that kissing spine is a disease that some horses are just prone to, but whatever you believe – the fact is that it can definitely be caused and impacted by poor riding and bad saddle fit.

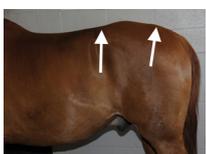
To understand how saddle fit plays a role in kissing spines, you first have to examine the possible underlying factors. Along with “trainable” or conditioned reflexes, both horses and humans have parasympathetic, non-consciously controllable reflex points, where muscles react to a stimulus of specific nerves without the horse or human being able to stop them.

A saddle which is too long, or pinches at the gullet, or is too tight over the shoulder(s) (where the tree width or angle is incorrect) and, as a result, sits on one of the horse's specific reflex points can cause many problems. The equine spinal column has nerve ends which protrude between each of the vertebrae. About five of these nerve ends are actual reflex points. Using pressure between the 18th thoracic vertebra and ending at the withers to approximate the feel of a saddle (under even a light rider) will cause the horse to drop his back. If the horse were to assume this position the whole time under saddle, the formation of the condition known as 'kissing spine' would result – presuming it is not already present.

Pressure on these nerve ends from a gullet channel which is too narrow, a saddle which is too long, or a saddle which twists during movement because of natural asymmetry (and a gullet plate which has not been fitted to accommodate the larger shoulder), will cause the horse to reflexively lower his back to escape the pressure and/or resulting pain.

The propensity of many incorrectly trained riders to neglect proper gymnastics of the horse at the lower levels to get him to “bring his back under” properly has resulted in what is known as “leg movers” rather than “back movers” – which looks stunning to the general public but I would warrant a guess that many of these horses are also suffering from kissing spine. If not yet present, it will develop from this type of riding, where the back remains hollow rather than supple, causing the vertebrae to lean into each other.

So at the end of the day, the existing condition can be rectified by changing how you ride, and changing the fit of the saddle – even if it is not completely reversible.



Hunter's Bump

Hunter's bump is another physiological issue resulting from poor saddle fit. I have actually heard that it's desirable for a hunter horse to have this special shape to their back – nothing could be further from the truth! Many horses you see in hunter classes are actually being ridden “upside down” – a hunter's bump is usually caused by poor riding (and again – exacerbated by poor saddle fit!). When the horse's head and neck are being forced into a false frame without support from the back muscles, this puts an incredible amount of negative pressure on the vertebrae, sacrum and pelvis. In simple terms, the sacrum falls forward and downwards, and because the spine follows this action, the lumbar vertebrae will create the hunter's bump to compensate for the sacral “dislocation.” If you also have a saddle which continually is pushed to one side (as unfortunately many hunter type saddles are, given that a) they generally cannot be adjusted at the gullet plate to accommodate the necessary shoulder width and angle); b) they have very narrow gullet channels; and c) their panels are generally either felt or foam – in other words cannot be reflocked – this means even more negative pressure at the S-I joint. The end result is often not only a hunter's bump but also lameness in one of the hind legs.

I have seen this over and over again... our stoic horses are doing their best to accommodate the rider's wishes but are constant injections to “cover the pain” really the answer?

Both of these conditions can be addressed with proper training and equipment – but there is no quick fix and you definitely should work with professionals – professional trainers educated in the classical riding methodology and professional saddle fitters or ergonomist who have access to saddles which are truly adjustable to address all of the horse's conformational requirements.

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