

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

This phrase is often heard and can apply to many things. In relation to horses it could mean the prevention of bad habits like cribbing, by ensuring correct stable management or it could be the prevention of accidents by correct risk assessment and following appropriate safety measures. More importantly it can be said in relation to the prevention of disease and disability. For example, it is easier to prevent a loss of condition than to build a debilitated horse up again. The same applies to physical problems in both horse and rider.

It is fairly general practice to have regular vaccinations to prevent disease, this is a simple procedure and merely means remembering the due date and booking the vet. Regular checking of the teeth and saddle are other routine procedures that aim to prevent problems developing. These checks are often carried out once or twice each year, depending on a horse's age and past history. Dentists or saddlers may also be called if a problem is suspected by monitoring typical signs such as pommel or cantle too low, ridden evasion of the bit, difficulty chewing or dropping food when eating.

However, some areas of equine health, such as problems related to the musculo-skeletal system (the muscles, skeleton, tendons and ligaments), need owners to be more knowledgeable and vigilant in order to detect problems early on particularly in their early stages before they develop into more significant issues. The advantage of the early detection of muscle, tendon and joint problems is of course primarily the welfare of the animal, but it is also usually much more cost effective for the owner too. Getting a professional opinion from a suitably trained and qualified practitioner will potentially identify minor problems early on and allow treatment and/or advice to be given to alleviate the problem, thus preventing things escalating and creating yet further secondary problems as a result. Once problems are more established they will usually require more extensive treatment and may often involve the vet, farrier, saddler and other professionals. Once a full course of treatment has been carried out and successfully rectified or managed the problem, maintenance or prevention is often much easier.

An example of a common problem is back pain but the principles of assessment and treatment often apply to many other physical problems.

When an owner contacts Bluebell Veterinary Physiotherapy Clinic and we are asked to carry out a 'back check', it is not necessarily because the owner has any major concerns but more usually because of minor performance issues or the fact that something (rider, workload, type of work etc) is changing. When assessing the above, it is far more than just the back that we look at. After in depth discussion with the owner, a physical assessment is carried out. This would typically include analysis of posture, conformation, condition, symmetry, old scars, feet, shoes, tack and so on. Movement is then evaluated at different paces on different terrain and on the lunge. A ridden and/or rider assessment may also be carried out if it is considered to be relevant to the problem. For example, if the horse is sound in hand and only shows problem signs when under saddle.

Primary back problems in horses are generally uncommon and are much more commonly *secondary* to something else. That is, the back pain is usually the result of another problem such as a sub-clinical lameness. This means an underlying lameness

that is not particularly obvious when watching the horse move normally and may need more specific assessments to uncover it, such as flexion test, trotting circles on firm ground and maybe nerve or joint blocks.

Primary back problems directly involve the back and surrounding structures. These back problems can be either extrinsic (meaning outside the body) such as problems caused by a rider and/or saddle, or intrinsic (from within the body) and an example of this is Dorsal Spinal Process impingement more commonly known as ‘Kissing Spines’. The primary problem, whether it be in the back or somewhere else in the musculoskeletal system of the horse, must be uncovered and addressed otherwise problems will eventually return despite treatment.

It is not unusual to hear clients say that they have had to have their horses ‘back done’ at regular intervals as there is an ongoing problem or something needs ‘putting back’ in place at regular intervals. Unfortunately, very often there is no diagnosis of the ‘problem’ and the underlying issues are often masked by this regular treatment which can cause further and more serious problems in the longer term. An example of this would be a low grade/chronic suspensory ligament problem with associated sub-clinical lameness and resultant secondary back pain. The back pain is treated so the horse feels more comfortable and continues to be worked over the underlying problem until this worsens and is no longer sub-clinical.

So the key to successfully preventing problems is a detailed/specific assessment from a veterinary surgeon, veterinary physiotherapist or other qualified and insured practitioners who work with your vet’s authorisation. When treating any animal, Veterinary Authorisation is a legal obligation under the Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966). It is also vitally important that the professional that you choose knows when to refer on to other specialists for further investigation and advice.

So as an owner how do you know if you need a veterinary physiotherapist to assess your horse? Well, in the same way as for the dentist, a regular preventative assessment would be the answer. This is probably advisable around the time of your saddle review, especially if you are unsure of any tell tale, subtle signs that could signal the onset of a problem. Two commonly encountered signs that are often recognised but misinterpreted or overlooked are dragging/toe catching of the hind feet – often considered as laziness and being ‘cold backed’ where the horse may hollow/dip away from the saddle when it is first put on or when the rider mounts - which is still considered by some to be a behavioural trait that is just one of those things! It isn’t, and both problems indicated above are a strong indicator of a problem. When you produce the saddle and your horse walks away, he is often trying to tell you something in the only way he can! It is better to act now than to wait several months and be bucked off.

Other signs that could be indicative of a problem are:

- Difficulties with specific transitions despite training and practice
- Altered performance at events
- Altered temperament, napping and behavioural issues
- Uneven Shoe or foot wear
- Dragging toes of hind limbs or tripping with front limbs
- Crookedness or drifting of quarters or shoulders to one side

- Better trot on one rein, better canter the other
- Not tracking up
- Hollow outline, difficulties going ‘on the bit’
- Jumping or ‘hopping’ into transitions
- Refusing to jump or drifting to one side over a jump
- Becoming disunited in canter, especially on one rein
- Horse prefers canter to trot
- Saddle and/or rider shifts to one side



- Rugs slip in one direction
Horse lacks topline muscle despite regular exercise
- Hair rubs or lumps under the saddle area
- Small swellings after unsaddling
- Tail held crooked or clamped down
- Rider with a back or other limb problem that impacts on their riding

If after reading the above you are still unsure if there might be a problem, we are happy to discuss your concerns over the phone without obligation. Our Veterinary Physiotherapists are fully Chartered Physiotherapists who trained at the Royal Veterinary College, London as well as being experienced equestrians who compete and/or instruct. Please feel free to call us for an informal discussion of your concerns.



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Further information can be found at:
The Association of Chartered Physiotherapist in Animal Therapy - www.acpat.org
The Royal Veterinary Centre - www.rvc.ac.uk