

WHY CHIROPRACTIC FOR HORSES MAKES SENSE!

By Dr. Sabrina MacDonald, BKin, DC, CAC and Dr. Alison Seely BSc, MSc, DVM, CAC

Chiropractic for horses? That evokes a raised eyebrow from many Canadian horse people. It sounds like something that would be popular in California perhaps, by people who also pay for dog psychotherapy sessions, and fork out money for colour coordinated pedicure and “paw”dicures. But surprisingly, horse chiropractic is becoming more and more mainstream.

Horses have spines, and we sit on them! Chiropractic can resolve issues that have not responded to traditional veterinary care and can often save the horse owner money and time. It also ensures the optimal biomechanics that allow the horse to perform optimally, sometimes dictating a loss or win, whether the horse is used recreationally or professionally.



Dr. Sabrina MacDonald is also a chiropractor for humans, although her recent specialty, horses, is a favourite. Emmeline is enjoying this!

Animal Chiropractic is a field of animal health care that focuses on the preservation and health of the neuro-musculo-skeletal system. All animals have spines that are subject to stresses that make them apt to misalign. If the movement and biomechanics of the vertebra become dysfunctional, they can interfere with the performance of the nerves. The basic premise of chiropractic care is to correct the vertebral misalignment to maintain adequate nerve supply that is vital to the proper functioning of the entire body.

Why does an animal require chiropractic care?

Normal events such as birth or the regular wear and tear of ageing can affect your horse. Misalignments can be invisible to the owner but their effects of decreased function, lameness and suboptimal health are real and recognizable. Horses are especially vulnerable due to the extra stresses we place on their spines when riding and asking them to work.

You may notice one or more of the following if your horse has a misalignment in his spine:

- Neck and /or back pain
- An inability to flex at the poll
- Unequal bending from side to side
- Difficulty with collection or the lateral gaits
- Difficulty engaging the hindquarters
- Short striding
- Unusual “grumpiness”
- Sensitivity/pain over the withers area
- Difficulty holding a leg for the farrier
- Behavioral changes (bucking, rearing, refusing)
- “Roach back” appearance

- Resenting mounting or tacking up

Advice for the rider

When possible, mount from a high enough block so you can avoid putting your foot in the stirrup on the same side as you. If you must mount from the ground, try to push with your legs rather than pull with your arms. Lengthening your stirrup to help you mount significantly increases the torque and pressure on the spine. Also, try to alternate which side you mount from.

When looking for a horse, find one that is suitable for your size and weight. Research has shown that horses start to show signs of muscle soreness and tightness when carrying 20% of their body weight – they also have an elevated heart rate, respiration and temperature compared to those carrying 15%-20% of their weight. When doing your calculation, be sure to include the weight of your tack as it can significantly increase the total weight on the horse's spine.

It is imperative that you find a saddle which is fitted to your horse. Economics often dictate that a saddle from another horse gets used on your horse, or that several saddles are shared by several horses. This is a bit like sharing shoes - rare to find that "one size fits all". Indications that the saddle is a poor fit include the obvious dramatic changes of saddle sores or discoloured hairs. More subtle changes are visible in flinching with pressure over the paraspinal areas under the saddle, uneven sweat marks, resentful attitude when the girth is cinched, and bucking with a shift in rider's weight. The most common mistakes are saddles with trees which are too narrow, saddles which bridge the back and rest all weight on the withers and lumbar areas, and saddles which rock, with most contact resting in the center. A good saddle is

buttressed by almost all the thoracic vertebrae, the vertebrae with ribs.

Most saddle choices are made in tack shops with priority given to fitting the saddle to the rider's bum. Although comfort in the saddle makes for a happier rider, the fit to the horse is more critical. A saddle fitter can give you measurements to help guide saddle choice. Most equine chiropractors will offer saddle fitting as a service since a poor fit sabotages any work done to restore alignment in the spine.

Canines

Although this publication targets the horse world, we have found few barns which don't have some dogs running merrily (and hopefully warily) amongst the horses. Dogs can also be vulnerable to stresses placed on their spines through their collars and regular daily activities. Dog collars can place a significant amount of stress on their lower necks, especially if they pull on their leashes or you pull on the leash while training. Find a collar that is the proper width for your dog's neck to try and disperse the area of tension if he pulls on the leash. You should be able to fit two finger widths under the collar. A harness is a good solution if your dog has a history of neck pain. However, if the dog is not properly trained on leash, then a harness may encourage him to pull harder. There are several "no pull" harnesses on the market, but they work by limiting muscular flexibility

If you have hardwood flooring at home, your dog is more likely to slip and splay which can cause spine and hip issues. If your dog likes to run and play in the house, a floor runner is a great idea in common dog areas. Preventing your dog from jumping down from high surfaces can also protect his back. If your dog likes to be on your bed, building a step beside the bed will allow the dog to come down safely. At

the very least, place a carpet or mat in the spot that your dog likes to jump down.

What does a chiropractic appointment entail?


Animal Chiropractors are trained specialists who have a minimum of 8 years of post secondary education as either veterinarians or chiropractors and have pursued post graduate certification by an accredited school for animal chiropractic.

At the initial exam, the animal chiropractor will determine which vertebrae are involved by combining the findings of the case history, posture and gait analysis, and static palpation. He or she will then perform a gentle motion to restore alignment to the vertebrae, called an “adjustment”.



Dr. Alison Seely, a vet as well as an animal chiropractor, says that most animals really enjoy being adjusted. It feels good to have motion restored and the horse here is giving a big sigh.

Animals typically need far less adjustments than their human counterparts. A misaligned horse can trigger misalignments in their rider, and the corollary is true as well: a subluxated rider can alter the spinal mechanics of the horse.

It is wise and more cost effective in the long run for both rider and horse to benefit from chiropractic care. 

Editor’s note: I want to thank Alison and Sabrina for answering my call for an article explaining chiropractic care for our horses. Dr. Alison Seely and Dr. Sabrina MacDonald are animal chiropractors in the greater Ottawa area and offer chiropractic care for horses at stables within a two hour drive of Ottawa. They also provide canine chiropractic at the Carp Road Animal Hospital. www.carproadanimalhospital.ca Alison and Sabrina can be reached at ottawaanimalchiro@gmail.com.

To find a certified animal chiropractor in your province or state, you can visit www.avcadoctors.com or check out www.collegeofanimalchiropractors.org