

The Lowdown on Low Back Pain: The Bane of the Rider's Existence

by Elizabeth Hanson



One of the most debilitating, bothersome and time-stealing problems in the lives of many riders - yes, even gaited horse riders - is lower back pain. There are many ways to address this problem from both a treatment and a prevention standpoint. Simple solutions such as lifting techniques and body positioning while working are critical and may cause significant changes in structure and function. Aerobic exercise may help. Getting better circulation to all muscles will assist in clearing out waste products in your body that can contribute to muscle tension.

Unfortunately most preventative and long-term measures are seldom done regularly; riders don't want to spend time exercising, we want to ride. So, we need exercises to better our ride while we prevent the bodily discomforts that plague us - solutions geared to riding.

Let's look at two of the most common sources of back pain for the rider and some answers to start you on the way to better back health and riding pleasure.

Back Challenge I

THE FIRST SOURCE OF POTENTIAL back pain is one that applies to everyone, but the problems are increased in frequency in the rider due to certain activities. Any repetitive muscular activity can be a problem: sweeping, raking, shoveling, cueing the horse, etc. When muscles are used repeatedly those muscles tend to get tight and/or overstretched and opposing or balancing muscles often get cramped and weakened. Many back problems start with simple activities that may not seem to be stressful.

Cleaning a stall is a good example. Barn chores are viewed as either an unfortunate necessity or a Zen-like practice in responsibility and meditation. Either way, almost everyone gets to do them and they can be a source of low back and neck pain that can result in time off the horse.

Constant use of the muscles that bend the trunk causes them to tighten, often resulting in lower back pain. This tightness causes the abdominals to be poorly utilized and

they, in turn, get weaker. Most people have either strength or tightness in the muscles that pull the pelvis forward, curving the low back more, and less strength in the muscles which push the pelvis back, lessening the curve in the low back. The resulting low back instability leads to many of the back problems we experience.

Solution I

◆ Use common sense

Leave plenty of time for chores. Don't do too much of the repetitive action at once. Moving between chores and allowing other muscles to be used can lessen tiredness and tightness. Be sure to use good body positioning and lifting technique (lift with your legs, assisted by the core muscles instead of lifting with the back).

◆ Strengthen the core and balance the body

Everyone, especially those who prefer to stay with one task and get the



Starting position for Spinal Bridging



Curl your spine up, one vertebra at a time, ending in a bridge.

stall mucking done, needs strength in the proper muscles and balance between the muscles that pull the pelvis forward and those that move it back. Once you have that balance and strength, the body is much better able to handle repetitive stress. Core muscle support will take unnecessary stress off of the muscles used in these activities giving them the ability to work longer and more efficiently. When doing chores, activate the abdominal muscles by pulling the belly button in towards the spine. This action begins activating the core muscles, helping stabilize the body and preventing injury.

Low Back Challenge II

The second source of low back pain for riders, and the one that most of us recognize, is the repetitive jostling that comes from riding itself. A gaited horse is a great help here. The smoothness of the ride does wonderful things for the back and, indeed, it is the reason many gaited horses are purchased. But, even the smoother ride of a gaited horse may not ease all back problems.

Solution II

◆ Use horse sense

Proper fit of horse to rider is essential. How you sit the horse and the position of your body on the horse is important for riding health and comfort. Proper riding technique is also needed to minimize shock.

◆ Strengthen the core and balance the body

By building-in a girdle of support for the back and abdomen the body is able to more efficiently absorb shock. Support allows the motion to be spread throughout the system instead of focusing it in the back, neck and shoulders. This girdle of support comes from the core muscles of the body. These strong, deep muscles surround the trunk protecting the organs, providing support and adding a power-assist to the muscles of the arms and legs. Strength in these muscles begins to build the necessary balance to absorb shock and prevent pain and injury.

If this all sounds like work, here is the great news; building strength, flexibility and balance in these muscles improves

not only your health making your ride easier and more fun, these muscles also increase the ability to ride and ride well. So while you are preventing back pain, your focus can be on the benefits in the ability to ride better and communication with the horse better.

Below is one simple exercise that can start you on your way to core awareness, flexibility and lower back health.

Spinal Bridging

Goal - Lengthen and increase the flexibility of your spine by rolling through each vertebra while engaging your abdominal muscles to initiate and control your movement. (After each bridge the spine should feel longer).

Application to Riding - Flexibility, suppleness, and added length in the spine help prevent a rigid posture and allow you sit up tall while in the saddle. Suppleness, strength and flexibility in the spine also help you more evenly distribute the stress of absorbing the horse's motion. Spinal bridging will also help eliminate head bobbing and will balance the seat.

Start on your back with your knees bent, your feet on the floor, and your arms at your side. Your knees should be hip width apart, and your hips, knees, and feet should in a straight line. Make sure that your pelvis and back is in "neutral spine". To do this, find the two hips bones on the front side of the pelvis and place the palms on them and then place the fingertips on top of the pubic bones. Neutral spine position is when the hipbones are level with the pubic bones.

- ◆ Inhale through the nose.
- ◆ Exhale through the mouth as you engage your abdominals and pelvic floor muscles. To engage your abdominal muscles pull your navel in towards your spine. To engage your pelvic floor contract the muscles needed to prevent urination.
- ◆ Inhale through your nose.
- ◆ As you exhale raise your tailbone toward the ceiling, flattening your lower back. Curl your spine up, one vertebra at a time, ending in a bridge.
- ◆ In the bridge position, inhale through your nose and reach with the knees to lengthen the spine.
- ◆ Exhale through your mouth as you curl back down starting with the upper back, moving towards the middle of the back and ending with the lower back and finally the tailbone returning to a neutral position. It should feel like you are moving one vertebra at a time.
- ◆ Repeat 7 more times.

Pay close attention to whether or not your spine easily peels off the mat one vertebra at a time or if it feels more like a huge chunk moving at once. Focus on engaging your abdominal muscles and pelvic floor allowing your lower back to relax. Notice how your spine lengthens and releases tension. Do not allow yourself to sink into one hip or the other for support. That would indicate overuse of one side. If this happens, engage your stomach muscles to even out your hips.

About the Author

Elizabeth Hanson, whose best friend as a child was a racking horse named APRIL JUBILEE, is the founder and developer of Equestrian Pilates. Elizabeth holds clinics to teach riders how to stay healthier and ride better by practicing Equestrian Pilates. She also certifies Pilates instructors to teach Equestrian Pilates. Her book entitled *Equestrian Pilates: An Owner's Manual for the Equestrian Body* is currently available as an e-book. You can read her article, "Finding the Sweet Spot" in the Fall 2005 issue of *The Gaited Horse*.

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