



— FREE GUIDE —

# 5 Signs Your Horse Has Muscle Tension

*and what to do about it*

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A simple, practical guide for horse owners who want to catch tension early, keep their horses moving freely, and prevent small issues from becoming big ones.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Your horse is trying to tell you something.

*Horses are stoic by nature. They evolved as prey animals, which means hiding pain and weakness is a survival instinct — not a choice.*

By the time a horse is clearly lame or uncomfortable, tension has usually been building for weeks or even months. The horse that starts pinning its ears at the girth, the one that's suddenly reluctant to pick up a lead, the gelding that's a little stiffer than he used to be — these are not personality quirks.

They're communication. Your horse is telling you something is off. The sooner you learn to listen, the easier it is to help.

*“Every horse, regardless of breed or discipline, deserves to feel and perform at their absolute best.”*

This guide walks you through the five most common signs of muscle tension in horses — what to watch for, what they might mean, and what you can do about them. It's written for owners of competition horses, pasture pals, seniors, and everything in between.

No horse is too casual for bodywork. And no sign is too small to take seriously.

## THE FIVE SIGNS

# What to watch for.

1

## Changes in Behavior Under Saddle

This is often the first — and most misread — sign. A horse that suddenly becomes “cold-backed,” pins its ears when you girth up, swishes its tail constantly, refuses to pick up a lead, or bucks into the canter isn't being difficult. It's in discomfort.

**WATCH FOR**

Cinchiness, hollowing the back when mounted, refusing transitions, head tossing, teeth grinding, or an unusually short attention span during work.

2

## Asymmetry in Movement or Posture

Stand behind your horse on a flat, level surface. Are the haunches even? Does one shoulder look more developed than the other? Horses compensate constantly, and over time, that compensation shows up in muscle development, posture, and the way they carry themselves.

**WATCH FOR**

Uneven muscle development across the topline, one hip sitting higher than the other, consistently standing with one leg parked out, or a head tilt under saddle.

3

## Reluctance to Bend or Flex

A healthy horse should be able to bend softly through its body in both directions. Stiffness, particularly on one side, is one of the earliest signals that fascia or muscles are restricted. This often shows up long before lameness does.

**WATCH FOR**

Difficulty bending on circles, hollowing through the rib cage, resistance to lateral work, reluctance to lower the head for stretches, or a stiff neck at the cross-ties.

## THE FIVE SIGNS · CONTINUED

## What to watch for.

4

### Decreased Performance or Slow Warm-Ups

If it's taking longer for your horse to get loose, if they feel “stuck” in the first 15 minutes of a ride, or if they've lost a step at the level of work they used to do easily — that's data. Chronic tension limits range of motion, and limited range of motion caps performance long before lameness appears.

**WATCH FOR**

Longer warm-up times, loss of suppleness, inability to engage the hindquarters, a hollow back under saddle, or dropping scores in a consistent training program.

5

### Visible Tension or Reactivity to Touch

Run your hand firmly — not lightly — along your horse's back, shoulders, and hindquarters. A relaxed horse responds calmly. A horse with tension will flinch, twitch the skin, swish, or shift away. You may also feel “ropy” tight bands in the muscle, or hot spots where inflammation has built up.

**WATCH FOR**

Skin twitching along the back, flinching at grooming, tight or ropy muscle texture, heat in a specific area, or an unusually “wired” temperament that doesn't match their personality.

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

## Start here.

If you recognize one or more of these signs in your horse, don't panic. Most muscle tension is highly responsive to proper care — you just have to address it before it becomes compensation, and compensation before it becomes injury.

**Rule out pain first**

Always start with your vet if you suspect lameness, sudden behavior change, or a specific injury. Bodywork complements veterinary care — it doesn't replace it.

**Check the basics**

Saddle fit, dental balance, and hoof care are the foundation. A bodywork session won't hold if the saddle is pinching or the feet are unbalanced.

**Do a weekly body scan**

Run your hand firmly over your horse weekly. Note what's new. Early awareness catches tension before it becomes a problem.

**Bring in bodywork**

A qualified equine sports massage therapist can release the soft tissue restrictions your vet and chiropractor can't reach with manual techniques.

Preventative bodywork every 4–8 weeks keeps most horses in excellent shape. Horses in heavy training, show seasons, or recovery from injury may benefit from more frequent sessions.

## READY FOR THE NEXT STEP?

## Book a free 15-minute consultation.

Not sure if your horse needs bodywork? Let's talk. I'll help you figure out whether a session makes sense for your horse — no pressure, no sales pitch.

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