Back Pain

While many horses with neck pain recover well with treatment, some injuries or ailments are too severe for medical intervention, leaving owners and veterinarians to grapple with the problem. At the 2016 Western Veterinary Conference, held in March in Las Vegas, lameness specialist Robin Dabareiner covered the region and its problems in sport horses.

As it is with neck pain, a thorough history will help the veterinarian narrow down the problem. The back and neck are closely related, and we must consider both regions. This is especially true for upper back injuries, which can involve both the thoracic and cervical vertebrae. Back pain is often caused by the interplay of many factors, such as overtraining, feed issues, and Jobsite-related injuries.

Because back pain is so closely related to the neck, it's important for a veterinarian to collect a thorough history when evaluating a horse for potential neck pain. A back pain scenario often includes:

- A lack of impulsion;
- Abnormal (or no) bends or flex;
- A wide or high head;
- An arched back; and
- Scanning (in which the horse's head is held in a neutral or extended position, a willingness to work in one direction but not the other, a wide or high head, and an arched back).

Neck pain often presents as poor performance or a behavior change that doesn't match a horse's back pain.

Common Thoracolumbar Problems

The thoracolumbar spine includes the lumbar vertebrae, five sacral vertebrae, and 18 to 22 caudal (or tail) vertebrae (depending on the individual horse). Dabareiner focused on issues of the thoracolumbar region and the sacroiliac region.

Dabareiner said common complaints from owners often appear following a traumatic event, such as a fall or collision. As with neck pain, a thorough history will help the veterinarian narrow down the problem. Common thoracolumbar problems include:

- Dressage, and flat and harness racing.

Kissing spines can be treated with interspinous injections (injecting anti-inflammatory agents and nutrients into the spinous processes) and/or dexamethasone or bupivacaine injections. Dabareiner recommended using radiography and scintigraphy (bone scans) to rule out similar conditions such as synovial osteochondromatosis and spinal osteochondrosis.

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A horse's back is a complex structure in which more than a hundred muscles support and move seven lumbar vertebrae, five sacral vertebrae, and 18 to 22 caudal (or tail) vertebrae (depending on the individual horse). Dabareiner focused on issues of the thoracolumbar region and the sacroiliac region.

Back pain is often caused by the interplay of many factors, such as overtraining, feed issues, and Jobsite-related injuries.

A recent study by the Equine Reproduction Embryo Transfer Company, based in the United States, showed that about 7% of horses with cervical arthritis become ataxic (incoordinated), generally mildly. Swollen soft tissue structures can cause it, as well, so check all neck structures carefully.

If needed, performing diagnostic imaging, such as radiography, ultrasonography, and/or nuclear scintigraphy (bone scans), is useful in these cases, she said. About 4 grams of tiludronate (which is essentially used to slow bone remodeling and quiet bone inflammation) can be injected into the affected region, followed by a three-month controlled exercise program.

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