

# Tension Patterns in Horses

by TTEAM/TTouch Instructor Sarah Fisher

**Understanding how posture relates to and directly influences behaviour in horses can give you valuable information about how and why your horse reacts the way he does in certain situations. This can be a helpful tool when thinking of taking on a horse when you have to rely on the information given by the previous owner or when faced with problems handling or managing the horse already in your care.**

## What are Tension Patterns?

Tension Patterns are areas of tightness that exist in a horse's body. They may be obvious and inhibit the natural movement of the animal to a greater or lesser degree or may be subtle and less easily detected. Either way they will have an effect on the way the horse functions on an emotional, mental and physical level. They can influence not only how the horse thinks, feels and learns but can hamper its ability to be trained, accept contact, cope with the farrier, travelling etc and adapt to new situations.

In my experience, there is always a reason for 'unwanted' behaviour and in cases where the horse reached a plateau in its training or rehabilitation, veterinary examination proved that there were often quite serious underlying physical causes. Tension Patterns can arise from poor training, inappropriate dental and hoof care, poor tack or rug fit, injury or disease, stress, or inappropriate management. Whilst conformation plays an important part, some horses are born with Tension Patterns that they inherit from their parents, which then influence how the horse is handled and trained in its early years. Humans copy their posture from those around them; it is likely that the horse follows the same pattern since visual learning is such an important part of the development process for all beings. Learnt posture and behaviour can further exacerbate the tension that the horse carries from its earliest years and so the cycle of unwanted behaviours and poor posture continues.

Tension does not always have to imply something unwanted. Tension and stress are necessary for all structures

to maintain the ability to be supportive but the tension and stress must be as evenly distributed as possible to prevent uneven loading on one or more parts. When the tension in a horse is uneven, it has a knock on effect through the body and as posture and behaviour are so inextricably linked, unwanted behaviour patterns can arise.

Behaviour and emotional and mental well being are closely linked to a horse's physical state and each can affect the other for better or worse. Changing undesirable posture to a more functional one not only relieves physical discomfort but encourages more efficient body and brain use. A horse that is moving in a balanced way is less prone to injury and illness and utilises its feed better.

Learning to identify Tension Patterns in your horse enables you to make positive steps to improving your horse's well-being as well as opening up deeper levels of mutual trust, awareness and understanding. Simply punishing the horse for undesirable behaviour or trying to push him through a physical problem makes existing Tension Patterns worse and leads to the creation of others.

## Identifying Tension Patterns

Try to get into the habit of spending time simply observing your horse. Watch how he moves, his general posture when at rest, when working in hand and when loose in the field. Look for free easy movement in a good rhythm and balance with an equal length and height of stride in both hind and forelimbs. Watch how the horse stands – is he square or does he stand in an uneven frame? Ask a friend to lead the horse towards you and away from you and watch how he tracks up. Look for uneven movement through the neck, withers, barrel and hind quarters. Is his posture straight?

Does he always lead with the same leg when moving off from a halt? Does he appear to be 'holding' in his poll, neck, back or hind quarters? Does he take a hind limb towards the mid line? There are endless observations to be made when watching your horse and detecting the smaller

more subtle patterns of holding takes experience. You can increase your awareness by practising with a horse you don't know as well as you may know your own since it is often easier to note postural traits when you are less biased as to what you might see. The more you watch, the more you will learn and the easier it will be to spot any peculiarities such as a tendency to roll or lie on one side in the field or stable or being concerned when approached in certain directions by horses or humans.

When handling your horse, note how he reacts to being tied up, led, saddled, bridled, rugged up, groomed, washed off, having his feet picked up and being shod. Look for any tell tale signs which might indicate all is not well such as uneven or incorrect muscle development, excessively or unevenly worn shoes or signs of irritation or defensiveness about being touched in certain areas. Under saddle be aware of points such as over sensitivity or resistance to leg aids, difficulty in striking off on a particular lead, hollowing, napping or stiffness on a particular rein. Jigging, stumbling, spooking, bucking, hollowing the back, swinging away as you mount, or sluggish movement can all indicate the presence of Tension Patterns.

In addition to using your powers of observation use the flat hand exploration to confirm your thoughts or to give you a more specific idea as to where the areas of tension lie. Start at the poll and run the flat of your hand smoothly down the neck, and down the shoulder. Run your hand under the neck, along the barrel, flank, stomach, over the back and hindquarters and down all four limbs ensuring that you check every part of your horse with the flat of your hand on both sides of his body. Check for 'ticklish' areas, hot or cold patches, muscle spasm, tightness, staring coat or coarse hair, scurfy patches or feeling of tightness in the skin or underlying muscle. Note whether your horse pulls faces at you when you touch a certain area, pins his ears, hardens his eye or holds his breath. He may move away, lift a leg, fidget, head shake or nip to express his concern.

## The Mouth

Tension in the mouth area generally signifies an overly-emotional and sensitive horse. It inhibits breathing which may be light and shallow and is linked to a state of tension existing throughout the entire body. If the mouth feels tight he may be inclined to reject or refuse titbits. However if the bottom lip is floppy it does not mean that the horse is relaxed. It can be an indication of discomfort and tension in

the poll area and may be indicative of long standing dental problems. Tight muzzles are often accompanied by tight or pinched nostrils and can be linked to a lack of tolerance and aloof and disinterested behaviour. Whilst there are many contributing factors dental problems must be ruled out first. If the deciduous teeth shed unevenly or the caps are retained it can cause problems for the horse from a young age whilst the presence of ramps, hooks, and sharp edges can cause tension throughout the body affecting performance and state of mind.

The tongue and saliva can also be an indicator of stress. Thick, sticky, white saliva can be linked to poor gut function and maybe caused by carbohydrate overload whilst a dry mouth may be an indicator of a nervous horse. Tongue chewing, lolling or sucking can be a sign of discomfort and all obvious causes such as dental problems, bit and saddle fit and sore muscles should be addressed. If your horse constantly sucks or pokes his tongue, or constantly chews on things even when at rest it is worth conducting a thorough physical examination as it can be an indicator of pain. Hormonal imbalance can also give rise to mouth issues and I have seen really sensitive horses whose tongue have what seem to be a deep crease running down the middle of the tongue to the tip. In Chinese Medicine this can be an indicator of trauma and can be caused by disturbance to the Heart and or Stomach Meridians.

Horses that hold tension through the mouth and muzzle area can also be:

- Difficult to paste worm
- Reluctant to have dental work carried out
- Difficult to catch, and or bridle
- Inclined to hold on to the bit when ridden or set their jaw against rein contact
- Slow to learn
- Easily distracted
- Head shy
- Likely to bite, nip or mouth
- Constantly worried
- Sharp

## The Face, Forehead and TMJ

In my opinion the horse's face, head and muzzle is one of the most neglected parts of the horse yet so much information about the general wellbeing of the horse can be gleaned by studying the horses face. Horses that lack trust

are generally wary of contact around the head and face and maybe reactive to things moving towards them. They may have cold patches over the nasal bone and the breath may feel cold on your hand. Tension around the head can be present in horses that are anxious and worry over even small changes to routine or those that are in a constant state of alert. Stress dips over the eye can be present in horses from a very young age and have little or nothing to do with age. Uneven development of the temporal muscle can cause issues with bridling and make a horse resistant on one particular rein. Tension around the forehead can also be linked to digestive disturbances as this area is linked to the Stomach in Chinese Medicine.

Tension in the Temporal Mandibular Joint (the hinge joint of the jaw) is almost always linked to dental problems although it can arise as a result of trauma to the head and poll area. If the horse has worked in a high headed posture for some time it may also be uncomfortable in the TMJ area as the high headed posture inhibits movement of the lower mandible. Checking the joint on both sides by feeling the area with your fingers can give you vital information about how a horse performs under saddle. In horses with extreme variations in performance when working on the left or right rein a change will be noted in the space or bone development in this joint.

Tension in this area can prevent the horse moving forward freely from the leg, and working in a soft, rounded outline. Problems with the TMJ will often result in problems with the opposite hip i.e. if the TMJ is locked on the left side of the horses jaw the right hip joint will be tight.

## The Ears and Poll

Tension in these areas generally accompanies tension in the areas listed above. Horses that are ear shy are often extremely tight through the poll and may have the floppy lower lip as described earlier. Horses with tension around the poll may be prone to sudden reactive behaviour such as rearing. Whilst tension in the poll does not necessarily result every time in rearing, every rarer that I have ever worked with has been tight through the poll and upper part of the neck. The horse may also trip or stumble since the area C1 and C2 affect movement of the front limb. If tension has been present for a while volatile outbursts of behaviour may occur as the horse literally loses his head due to impaired blood flow to the brain. They may appear to be shut down and often have an almond shaped, hard eye

that changes completely once the underlying cause has been addressed. There is a hormone acupuncture point behind the poll on both sides of the upper neck. Hormone imbalances can give rise to over sensitivity in this area.

Tight ears are linked to tension in the forehead and the poll. Often, circulation to the ear is inhibited and the tips may be cold to the touch. This is not always an indicator of the horse's general body temperature and is more evident in horses that are ear shy than those that are cold. If tension is present around the base of the ear, the whole ear may appear tight and will generally lack subtlety in movement. The horse with this Tension Pattern is more prone to pinning his ears back as a means of expression and may be described as being generally moody.

Horses with tension around the Ears and Poll are also likely to:

- Dislike having his forelock touched
- Find it difficult to work in a relaxed outline
- Be concerned about movement over his head
- Find it hard to walk under objects or low stable doors
- Pull back when tied
- Shoot off when the head collar is being taken off
- Be difficult to halter and bridle
- Show noise sensitivity

## The Neck

The neck is a really important part of the horse's body since it directly affects balance and the ability to move freely from behind. I find it distressing that so many horses are tied down from such an early age to create an illusion of working in a collected frame as it can cause so many problems for the horse throughout its adult life and inhibits the natural movement of the back and hindquarters.

Chinese Medicine places great emphasis on the health and mobility of the spine for correct organ function and it is certainly my experience that problems with both the neck and back can give rise to a host of unwanted behaviours. Tension in the neck may be seen in incorrect muscling with over bulking and under development of the appropriate muscles, or over defined cervical vertebrae. You may notice the mane 'jumping' as the horse lowers or raises its head which is another indicator of tight muscles and ligaments. Changes in the way the mane lies generally corresponds to tension in the neck and the horse may need

osteopathy or appropriate chiropractic work to help release the vertebrae. Tightness in the neck is often accompanied by a high head carriage, an inclination to hollow the back, or 'fixing' through the base of the neck. To initiate forward movement the horse may first raise its head before moving forward. It will always affect the horse's ability to engage behind.

Tension in the neck affects a horse's ability to learn, changes spatial awareness and can cause problems with depth perception and changes in light. This can make it hard for horses moving from and into trailers and stables. Horses that are tight in the neck can be spooky and concerned over bright objects. They may be worse in the summer when more light is reflected off shiny surfaces such as white boards, cars and water. Tension in the neck can also cause problems with pulling back when tied since the horse suddenly 'sees' the wall and startles even though they may have been standing quietly for a while. Tension around C3 can cause problems with skin sensitivity and C4 and C5 can give rise to gut disturbances as C5 is linked to the hind gut in Chinese Medicine. Horses that are pushy or barge when being handled are often tight in the neck and they may find it hard to stand since the neck is so important for balance.

Horses that are tight in the neck may also:

- Nap
- Find it hard to move forward from the leg
- Struggle to walk in a straight line
- Rush
- Work on the forehand
- Drop behind or come above the bit when asked for collection
- Bite

## Shoulders and withers

Tension in the shoulders and withers will create balance problems and is usually linked to the tension in the neck and back. The horse may balance or lean on the handler and the riders' hands since he finds it hard to work in a balanced frame. The gait will be uneven and the horse may be cinchy as tension behind the shoulder blade can cause sensitivity in the withers and around the girth area. Acupuncture points for the Lung and Heart Meridians are present in the wither area and many horses with Lung imbalance and over sensitivity are tight in this area. They may buckle or lie down when being saddled and have a ten-

dency to be habitually in the Flight/Fight reflex giving rise to spooky and reactive behaviour. They may be stiff through the whole body and lack impulsion from behind since the shoulders must be free to allow hind limb engagement. They may be inclined to strike or paw the ground.

In addition, the horse is likely to:

- Trip or stumble
- Have a short, choppy and/or uneven stride
- Be spooky
- Be difficult to rug and/or saddle up
- Fall in through the shoulder through turns and circles
- Find it hard to strike off on a particular rein
- Leave a front limb behind when jumping
- Struggle to travel and/or load
- Find it hard to bring the front limb forward for the farrier

## Back and Hindquarters

Horses that are tight in the back find it easier to do things at one extreme or another – either rushing or being sluggish and shut down. They will find it hard to jump, work in a confined space or struggle through tight turns and circles. Tension in the lumbar area is commonly found in horses that buck. Sensitivity may also be shown in the flank, barrel and belly and the horse may lose weight easily, or have the appearance of a saggy or bloated belly as a result of weak abdominal muscles.

Tension in the back can arise from a variety of issues. Saddle fit is vital but tension in the back can exist as a knock on effect from problems with the jaw, neck and feet giving rise to the appearance of poor saddle fit through loss of top line and muscle atrophy in the wither and back. Rider posture is important since the rider can inadvertently cause uneven muscle development in the back which influences every other part of the horse. Horses that are tight in the back may jig under saddle, become agoraphobic (not like being turned out), be highly defensive about horses and people approaching from the side or behind, and find it hard to relax. Tension in the lumbar area will give rise to the 'jumpers bump' as changes in the lumbar vertebrae change the sacroiliac joint. This is accentuated through loss of muscle tone over the hindquarters.

Inability to track up and/or wobbly movement behind can be indicative of tension through the back. The horse will often be close behind or move with one hind limb working

more towards the mid line and this is generally accompanied by loss of articulation through the hock joint or joints. This pattern is usually linked to tension in the hip area and the horse may find it impossible to stand square. This pattern will often be mirrored in the diagonal front limb.

Issues around the stifle joint including locking and sensitivity to contact can arise as a result of tension in the lower back – generally where the back of the saddle sits. Tension in this area may also make the horse sensitive to contact around the sheath.

Tight hindquarters are also linked to noise sensitivity, concern about movement behind the horse and nervousness.

Tension in the hindquarters and back can also lead to;

- Difficulty in loading and travelling
- Dropping a hind limb when jumping
- Kicking
- Issues with tail bandages
- Concern over leg wraps
- Rushing through narrow spaces such as gateways and stable doorways

## The Tail

It has been my experience that the tail mirrors the state of the back. The top of the tail can be likened to the shoulders and the end of the tail bone often mirrors the hind quarters. Horses that work on the forehand are often clamped at the top of the dock and those with a tilted pelvis often have a corresponding stiffness and lift at the end of the tail bone. Horses that find it consistently hard to release the tail often have ongoing problems with the back and in the case of spinal problems such as kissing spine or stress fractures it may be that the horse never really releases its tail. Lack of suppleness through the whole body usually results in a rigid, stick like tail whilst a floppy tail usually indicates complete disconnection through the hind quarters and limbs.

Having worked with a wide variety of horses from a wide range of disciplines I am constantly amazed at the correlation between the back and the tail. One ex-racehorse who had swelling around the wither as a result of injury had a similar swelling around the top of the dock whilst a top novice dressage horse that had ruptured a ligament in the middle of its back had a corresponding tight and itchy spot in the middle of his tail.

The tail will also tend to be carried towards the tighter side of the horse and tail swishing is often indicative of tension through the whole back.

## The Legs

Tension through the shoulder and hindquarter will change flexibility through the entire leg. Loss of articulation in the hock joint will influence and be influenced by the hip whilst knee problems will influence and be influenced by tension in the shoulders. Cold lower legs are indicative of horses that are spooky and Flight oriented, and objects moving on the ground such as leaves or flapping plastic will cause concern to the horse with inhibited circulation to the lower leg.

Hoof care is vital for the overall well being of the horse. As with all Tension Patterns nothing exists in isolation. If the balance in the hoof is incorrect it will be four times worse in the shoulder or hind quarter. Tension in the back and wither will influence blood flow to the feet and an imbalanced foot will cause problems all round. Movement is vital for the health of the foot since blood flow is encouraged by movement. Horses that are stabled for the majority of their lives are more prone to diseases of the foot and poor farriery can cause a variety of problems. If problems exist within the balance of the hoof, the gait and wellbeing of the horse are affected. Tight fetlocks are linked to tension in the neck and/or back and simple gentle rocking of the fetlock joint when doing leg circles can go a long way to releasing problems further up the limb.

Concerns with the lower leg may also cause:

- Issues with having their legs handled
- Dislike of being washed off
- An increase in susceptibility to mud fever
- A dislike of walking through water
- Travelling and loading issues
- Tripping and stumbling

If you recognise any of the patterns described above there are steps you can take to change the situation. I have a fabulous horse that damaged his pelvis as a baby. This gives rise to a host of difficulties but with TTEAM he has gone on to compete in a variety of disciplines and has been placed in virtually every outing at local, county and national level. We cannot change what happened to him but

through awareness and knowledge we enable this horse to be as successful as he can be.

Altering habitual posture which creates areas of tension enables you to change associated behaviours. Trying to force a different more ideal outline will cause other problems. TTEAM can successfully help in gently rehabilitating the horse as well as preventing tensions patterns from arising in the first place. You can check out potential causes of the tension such as injury or a poorly fitting saddle and re think the way in which you handle, manage and train your horse.

## Sarah Fisher



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