

# MYSTERIOUS PROBLEMS IN MOTION?

The triangular posterior pectoral muscle is one of three pectoral muscles that help move your horse's foreleg. I am pointing to the top of the muscle, which spreads out and down toward the ground.

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Girth-area muscle tightness may be the answer, says a top equine massage therapist, who explains how to identify and alleviate this issue.

**By Jo-Ann Wilson**

**Photos by J. Stanley Edwards**

**Y**our horse used to enjoy his work, but now he pins his ears and sucks back when you ask him go forward. He balks when you ask for the canter and has trouble picking up the correct lead. He doesn't seem lame—but he doesn't seem right. What's up?

While a number of causes can underlie these signs, in my work as an equine sports massage therapist, I've found that one is especially common: Tight muscles in the girth area. In this article, I'll tell you how to figure out if your horse has this problem, and I'll outline some simple steps to solve it.

## THE PROBLEM

The specific muscle involved is the posterior pectoral, one of three pectoral muscles that help move the

foreleg. This flat, triangular muscle lies against the rib cage behind your horse's foreleg. It fans away from a point on the back of the humerus (the large arm bone below the shoulder) to points along his rib cage and sternum (breastbone) at the midline of the belly. When this muscle contracts, it pulls the leg back. Other muscles contract to move the limb forward—but the leg can't swing forward freely unless the posterior pectoral relaxes to let it go.

Simple muscle tightness here is a very common cause of shortened strides. If the posterior pectoral is tight, it doesn't release the leg easily, so forward motion is inhibited. Hind limb motion may be affected, too, as a horse's front and hind always move in synch. Your horse may be "girthy," objecting when saddled or mounted or moving with short, stilted

## FIND A TIGHT MUSCLE

To look for tightness or spasms in the posterior pectoral muscle, I stand at the horse's shoulder and use a flat, relaxed hand to stroke and press down toward the ground. I am feeling for bunched tissue or a soft, small hot-dog-shaped vertical lump.

To massage a tight posterior pectoral muscle, use a relaxed, open palm or the back of your hand, moderately pressing and stroking down toward the ground. If your horse moves away or reacts adversely to this, you may be using too much pressure. Try again, with less. If he continues to act uncomfortable, call a professional massage therapist.





**1/2** Avoid using your elbows or knuckles to massage a tight posterior pectoral. You cannot adequately feel with them and this is a sensitive area, so you may annoy your horse or cause him pain.

**3** Also, don't poke or jab with rigid fingers because you will not be able to feel tightness. Again, you will only annoy your horse or cause him pain.

steps. In extreme cases, a horse may even rear to resist going forward. Often, though, the signs are subtle. Because your horse is uncomfortable reaching fully forward in front, he may:

- have difficulty going up or down hills;
- be reluctant to pick up a lead or tend to swap off or cross-canter;
- hang a leg over fences;
- have difficulty with banks, drops and ascending oxers—obstacles that require extra "reach" in front;
- show reluctance when asked for lengthenings or tempi changes; and
- tire quickly, because he has to work

against the tightness to go forward. When a horse shows any of these signs, it's not difficult to find out if the posterior pectoral is involved. Perform this simple check on each side of your horse: Stand at his shoulder and run your hand, fingers flat against his side, over the area behind his elbow. (This is a sensitive spot, so be aware that your horse may move away or even kick out, especially if he's sore.) If the muscle is relaxed, this area will feel flat and soft. If it's tight, or in spasm, you'll feel a knot—a lump in the shape of a small hot dog, across the muscle (perpendicular to the ground).

## WORK IT OUT

A simple massage technique helps the muscle relax. Standing behind your horse's shoulder, put the flat of your hand against his side just behind his elbow. Keep your hand relaxed. Using soft, moderate pressure with the entire

palm or back of your hand, gently work along the muscle for a distance of about one-and-a-half hand lengths. Your horse will tell you—by moving away, pinning his ears or giving other signs—if the pressure is too strong. Typically the knot releases in just a few minutes. Then the muscle feels soft and pliable, and your horse relaxes.

Follow the massage with exercise, which completes the treatment by activating and lengthening the muscle fibers. Cantering is especially helpful for this. To really solve the problem, though, you need to figure out what's causing the tightness. Here are six prime suspects, and the fix for each:

- **Saddle placement:** Incorrect saddle placement is the most common cause. Too often, the saddle is put on too far forward, so the girth passes right behind the elbow. Girth pressure there pinches the muscle and provokes spasms. *The fix:* Because every horse's conformation is slightly different, it's hard to make hard-and-fast rules for proper saddle



**TIP:** Complete a massage treatment by following it up with exercise to lengthen and activate the muscle fibers.

and girth position. But you'll generally be safe if you place the saddle so that it doesn't sit on his shoulder blade and interfere with the action of the shoulder and so there's space between his girth and his foreleg.

■ **Girth length:** A short girth like those used in dressage sometimes causes the posterior pectoral to tighten, particularly if the buckles line up right on top of the muscle. *The fix:* Switch to a longer girth, and see if that ends the problem.

■ **Girth type:** A narrow girth concentrates pressure on a smaller area than a wide girth does and is more likely to cause problems. *The fix:* Try a wider girth. Fabric is a good choice, at least for schooling. I think it's more comfortable for the horse than leather. Elastic at one end of the girth is also good, because it allows a little give. Elastic at both ends may be too much if it allows the saddle to shift.

■ **Work:** Performing the same maneuver over and over—cantering endless circles, for example, or over-doing lengthenings—can lead to tightness in the girth area, as well as in other muscles. *The fix:* Vary the work, changing gaits and directions often.

■ **Footing:** Working in deep footing tires your horse and contributes to muscle tightness. *The fix:* Limit the amount you do in deep footing.

**TIP:** Massaging a tight area will help in the short run, but, for your horse's long-term well-being, take time to investigate the cause.

■ **Hidden problem:** Sometimes the real cause isn't at the girth area at all. Your horse may have a problem in his lower leg or foot, for example. He tightens the posterior pectoral to protect his sore leg by limiting the range of motion. (In orthopedic medicine, this is called "protective splinting.") Then the muscle goes into spasm. In cases like this, the knot often doesn't resolve quickly with simple massage, and the

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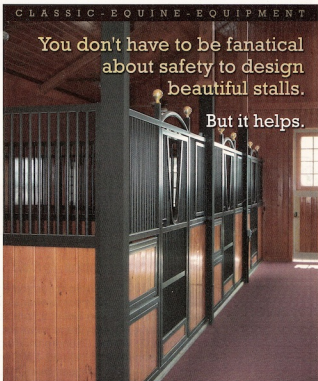
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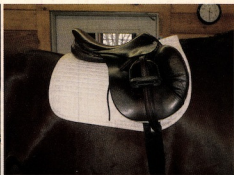
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**WRONG** A saddle placed too far forward on the horse's shoulder blade limits the full use of his shoulder. In this position, the girth passes right behind his elbow, which may pinch the pectoral muscle.



A correctly placed saddle sits behind the horse's shoulder blade and leaves space between the foreleg and the girth, allowing for full use of his pectoral muscle and shoulder.

problem doesn't clear up with changes in tack and work routines. *The fix:* No simple fix here; a veterinarian and/or farrier needs to assess your horse.

Correcting the underlying cause of the tightness should allow your horse to move freely again. In addition, some simple stretches and changes in warm-

up routines often help horses who have this problem.

■ Before you mount, stretch your horse's pectorals by drawing his front

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For some horses, a short girth may put added pressure on the girth muscle, causing tightness. Switch to a longer girth to see if the tightness resolves itself.

legs forward, one at a time. Grasp a leg behind the knee, lift it so that the forearm is almost parallel to the ground and gently pull it forward (see photo

side, as tolerated by your horse.

■ Warm up with work that encourages your horse to lengthen and stretch these muscles. Cantering is the most

tos page 66). (Don't grab the pastern and pull the whole leg out. That stretches his leg tendons.) Repeat with the other leg. If your horse has tightened his posterior pectorals in response to girth pressure, this will help release them. Do this stretch once or twice on each

concerted exercise for lengthening. (That's why the trot always feels so much better after a canter.) Walking up hills is also excellent.

■ When you untack after work, repeat the foreleg stretch described above. It will help release any lingering tightness.

By identifying tightness in your horse's posterior pectoral muscle and working to loosen it, you will be able to help him move more freely—and happily. 🐾

*Jo-Ann Wilson is a licensed massage therapist, teacher and researcher whose clinical practice includes humans as well as horses. Her equine practice spans all disciplines—from international competition horses to backyard pleasure horses. She worked at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney as the sports therapist for the United States Equestrian Team's eventing squad, winners of individual*



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## A SIMPLE STRETCH



One simple stretch to help tightness: Stand in front of your horse, place your hands behind his knee and gently lift his leg and bring it forward, so his forearm is almost parallel to the floor. Only do as much as your horse will tolerate.



**WRONG** Do not hold your horse's ankle and lift. Instead of working on the posterior pectoral, you'll stretch the tendons behind his leg.

gold and team bronze medals. Based in Searsport, Maine, Jo-Ann was a longtime associate of the late Jack Meagher, a pioneer in the field of sports massage therapy. She

partnered with him in Wilson and Meagher Sportstherapy, which offers training programs in the Meagher method of sports massage. Jo-Ann has also produced

an educational sportsmassage DVD, available this fall. Information on the programs is available online at [www.sportsmassageinc.com](http://www.sportsmassageinc.com).



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