

THE PROBLEM COULD BE POLL

Here's what you can do to prevent and relieve motion problems caused by muscle tightness in this key area of your horse's body.

By Jo-Ann Wilson with Sandra Cooke ■ Photos by Jim Leiby

Does your horse ...

- feel heavier in one rein than the other?
- resist bending in one direction?
- feel reluctant to step through from behind?
- begin to stop at fences?

When a horse owner mentions any of these problems to me, I won't be surprised if, in my overall evaluation of the horse, I find tightness in the muscles of the poll. This is an issue I encounter in horses from every discipline I work with, including dressage, eventing, show jumping, hunters, racing and endurance.

Where Is It?

First, let's define the territory we'll be working with.

The poll muscles I'll discuss in this article are the *rectus capitis* muscle group, located on each side of the horse's neck behind his ear. Technically, this group comprises three muscles that work in concert. I'll refer to them collectively for the sake of simplicity and because in Sports-massage Therapy™ I work on them together. They attach to three of the horse's cervical-neck-vertebrae, called the muscles' *anchor point*, about 8 inches down the neck from the poll. They also attach to the base of the skull, called the *insertion point*, the part of the skeleton for which the muscle group creates motion.

Acting together, the poll muscles flex the horse's head downward toward his chest. Acting separately, they incline the head to the right or the left.

Insertion Point

Muscle Belly

Anchor Point

Tightness in the muscles of the poll can cause an array of motion problems.

Poll Action

RIGHT: The poll muscles (rectus capitis) help to incline the horse's head and neck to the side.

BELOW: The poll muscles also work to flex the horse's head downward toward his chest.

BELOW RIGHT: The horse's ability to extend his neck fully, as shown here, may be compromised when his poll muscles are tight.



Why Is It Important?

Although the poll area is relatively small compared to some of your horse's other muscles, it is key to his freedom and ease of movement.

If you think of your horse's motion as a wave that originates in his hind end and flows through his body and neck, you can see that the poll is the point at which the wave ends: The energy flows all the way from the hind leg to the head. If the poll is tight on one side (or both), it interrupts the completion of the wave.

The effects of this interruption may show up as problems in other parts of your horse's body. This is why, whatever symptoms a horse is presenting, I always work on his entire body. Poll tightness may compromise his use of his back or may reflect a shortened step behind be-

cause he can't step up under himself easily and freely. Also, the dynamics of a horse's motion occur on a diagonal, so tightness in the left poll can reflect a problem in the right hind and vice versa. And because your horse's body works as a unit that strives for balance, tight poll muscles can also be a secondary issue, a warning flag for a problem that originates somewhere else. For instance, if simple muscle tightness in the gluteal muscles or the hamstring inhibits your horse's freedom of movement in his hind end, he will tighten in his poll to balance or compensate for this lack of freedom of motion behind.

Trouble Signs

Poll tightness may appear as just a vague resistance in your horse. For example, when your horse's poll muscles are tight

on the left side, he will lean on the left rein, not releasing to bend to the right with his head and poll or vice versa.

You also, however, may notice a dramatic change in his way of going. Hunters and jumpers with poll tightness may stop at the jumps. In this case, the horse is not avoiding the jumping effort itself but the landing. Every horse's jumping form is a little different, but generally speaking, the horse needs to be able to extend his head and neck to balance himself as his jumping arc descends. When the poll muscles are very tight, the poll is unable to release enough to allow the head and neck to extend. Knowing he will feel out of balance on the far side of the fence, the horse stops. I saw this problem recently with a top show hunter who began stopping for no discernible reason. His trainer asked

Sportsmassage

RIGHT: In compression, I use a relaxed hand and arm and press into the muscle with the heel of my hand.

BELOW LEFT: In cross-fiber friction, I use braced fingers and press back and forth across the muscle fibers.

BELOW RIGHT: In direct pressure, I use the tips of my fingers to apply pressure to the knotted area at the anchor point.

me to look at him after every training session had been exhausted. The horse's muscles felt good until I palpated the poll, which was rock-hard. After I had massaged out the tightness, the hunter once again jumped willingly.

Another possible indicator of a problem is that your horse reacts strongly when you try to palpate the poll area because it is very sensitive when it's tight. He may raise his head straight up to try to get his poll out of reach or he may step away from you. The more severe the tightness, the more dramatic his reaction is likely to be when you touch the area.

What Causes It?

Several common equine activities may contribute to or aggravate poll tightness. Any action that entails a repetitive motion or stretching may cause the muscle involved to become tight or go into a spasm that prevents it from stretching completely again. For instance, we've all seen a horse straining under the bottom rail of a pasture fence with his head and neck awkwardly extended to reach a few blades of grass.

There are also the halter games that horses play when turned out together: I've seen how one grabs the other's halter and gives it such a hard yank that he really pulls on his friend's head and neck.

Other causes: Equine dental problems may manifest as tightness in the poll. A horse who cribs may have this problem. And a cervical vertebra that's out of alignment may contribute to poll tightness.

As I mentioned earlier, some training and management practices can also be a cause of poll tightness:



■ **Hay nets or bags:** A hay bag hung so high that the horse needs to extend or stretch his neck up to eat from it can contribute to poll tightness. At racetracks, hay bags are hung outside and to one side of the stall doors; reaching around to eat is an awkward stretch for some horses' necks. If the bag is hung to the left of the door, any tightness it causes will be on the right side of the horse's neck and vice versa. This might be why a racehorse has difficulty bending his head and neck to the left and drifts out from the rail.

■ **Over-longeing:** When a horse travels on a circle, he tightens the muscles on the outside of his body to maintain his balance. The smaller the circle, the more he needs to compensate. Prolonged and repetitive longeing can contribute to poll tightness, as can longeing more in one di-

rection than the other.

■ **Tying:** If a horse pulls back against a tie—for instance during shipping—poll tightness may result.

■ **Uneven tension on the reins:** Just as many riders unconsciously sit more to one side, some habitually maintain more pressure on one rein than the other. For example, a rider may keep the right rein tighter, which could cause her horse to resist that pull with the left side of his poll, making that side tight.

■ **Incorrect use of equipment:** Training aids such as draw reins, chambons and others can encourage a horse to move in a certain way without stressing him when they are adjusted and used properly. But when the equipment is adjusted so that the horse is not allowed to use his body freely and in a balanced frame—and es-

Carrot Stretch

I demonstrate a technique for using a carrot to encourage Bobby to stretch his poll muscles. Here I'm stretching his poll's left side by holding the carrot on his right; then I'll move to his left with a carrot to encourage him to stretch the poll muscles on the right.

pecially when the equipment is misused this way repetitively—a horse may brace against the equipment and tighten his poll as a reaction to feeling unbalanced.

How Is It Relieved?

Every problem has a cause. Once you've established that your horse's poll is tight, sometimes a little detective work is involved to determine what's actually causing it. The cause may be right in the horse's neck itself—for instance, a misalignment of the cervical spine—but I find that most often, tightness in the poll reflects an issue somewhere else in the body. So when I'm evaluating and treating a horse, I know that if I find something that, for instance, is bothering him behind, the problem also will be manifested in his poll on the diagonal side. As stated earlier, this means a left-hind issue will manifest in the right poll muscles and vice versa.

In addition to working on the areas



that are affecting the poll, I massage tightness out of the poll itself. You can do this, too—I'll explain the three techniques I use. The key thing to remember is that although the rectus capitis muscles are dense and thick, you need to use a very soft hand in working on them. If your hand is tight when you try to massage the muscles, you won't be able to help your horse. Take a deep breath before you start the massage and think about approaching him with a soft manner, ready to receive information through your hand as well as to give relief.

The spasm causing the muscle tight-

ness is the result of a group of fibers that can't release, or let go, on their own. By mechanically creating pressure on those fibers and manipulating them, you help the spasm to release.

Here are the Sportsmassage techniques to use on your horse's poll:

■ **Compression**—Hook your fingers over his mane and use the heel of your hand to press into the muscle with a motion similar to CPR. Imagine there is a wall on the other side of the muscle, and you're pressing through to that wall. This action separates the muscle fibers, which lie very close together when a muscle is tight. As you create bigger spaces between the fibers, more blood can get into that area and the muscle softens. The compression is a rhythmical thrusting motion in a one-two count, performed along the muscle. Try to do seven overlapping compressions starting at the anchor point, also called the origin of the muscle, working toward the base of the skull and keeping your hand on the muscle. When you have completed the seven overlapping compressions, slide your hand back to the origin of the muscle and repeat the series. Do this three or four times.

■ **Direct pressure**—Palpating gently, you can feel a knot in the muscle tissue at the anchor point. Use the tips of your fingers to apply pressure directly to that knotted area. The horse's brain interprets the pressure as discomfort and sends more blood to the area of the knot, which helps to

soften the tissue. Do this for no more than 15 seconds.

■ **Cross-fiber friction**—Press gently on the muscle fibers with two fingers, moving the tips back and forth at right angles to the direction of the fibers, as if you were going across the grain of a piece of wood, to separate them further. As the action frees the muscle fibers, they can resume their normal lengthening and shortening activity. Do this for no more than 15 seconds.

If you're using too much pressure with these techniques, your horse will tell you by jerking his head into the air or moving away from you. If he begins to yawn, chew and/or drool, however, those are signs of a release and relief.

Poll tightness usually requires a number of treatments, no less than three days apart. A useful strategy for stretching the poll and keeping it relaxed between sessions is carrot stretches. For maximum benefit, always warm up your horse with a few minutes of hand-walking before doing these.

Although the rectus capitis muscles are a small part of your horse's total muscle mass, they affect how he uses his entire body. Keeping his poll loose and relaxed can improve his overall performance and well-being. 🐾

Thanks to dressage trainer **Sarah Chatfield** for her help with this story. A U.S. Dressage Federation silver and gold medalist who divides her time between Lincolnville, Maine, and Cocoa, Florida, Sarah trained our model for this story, **Pattent (Bobby)**, a 16-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding by Ragazzo out of a Cocktail mare, to Grand Prix. In 2009, Bobby won the Heidelberg Cup in Florida, and in 2011 he and Sarah were USDF Region 8 Intermediaire II Champions. Bobby and Sarah were reserve champion in the Grand Prix Freestyle at the Region 8 Championships at the NEDA Fall Festival last September.



To purchase a copy of Jo-Ann's instructional DVD, *A Course in Equine Sportsmassage*, go to www.HorseBooksEtc.com.

A Home For Every Horse Helped Indee Find Her Forever Home



Indee's Happy Tale Started Here

I had been doing searches on Equine.com for a few months looking for a pony for my kids, when I came across Indee's profile. It was love at first sight for me. She looked so sweet and gorgeous in her photos, I couldn't believe she was a rescue. I knew right then I had to have her! It was such a pleasure dealing with Beth and Amy at Cozee Valee Rescue (in Huntingdon, Pa.) throughout the adoption process. They made everything so easy and made a big effort to ensure Indee was going to a good home.

When I went to see Indee I knew I had made a good choice, she was even sweeter and prettier than I had imagined. Once we got her home, I had a brief moment of panic that I just adopted a 3-year-old pony for my little kids. However, my fears quickly subsided once I realized what a truly fabulous job Beth and Amy had done with her. She has perfect ground manners and is absolutely the sweetest pony I have ever handled. All three of my kids, who are 6, 4 and 2, go to the barn and brush, bathe and ride her and she has never put a toe out of place. We are in love with Indee and are so thankful to Cozee Valee and A Home for Every Horse for helping bring her into our lives." — Shana Menu, Chadds Ford, Pa.

Browse Rescue Horses and Learn More at:
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