Solutions for Rider Neck and Back Pain

Want to be an elegant, ache-free Rider? Then get moving.

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GOOD RIDING IS GOOD for your health. As little as 20 minutes of correct riding utilizes all of the postural muscles, loosens and moves all of the vertebrae, relaxes the hips, and essentially undoes the restrictions and imbalances that everyday life creates. Riding counteracts those hours spent sitting in the car or at a desk by "waking up" the slack abdominal, back, and shoulder muscles, and lengthening the leg muscles. Done correctly, dressage can be as beneficial for the rider as a Pilates or a yoga session.

Of course, we don't all have perfect position in the saddle. Riding is more "forgiving" than other sports that demand a high degree of balance, such as cycling and skiing, because a loss of balance won't necessarily cause you to fall. Lots of riders manage OK – at least for a while – despite poor posture, an incorrect head and neck position, or a rigid lower back. Sooner or later, if these position faults go uncorrected, not only will they hamper your horse's ability to move freely, but they'll also lead to shoulder pain, neck pain, lower-back pain, or all three.

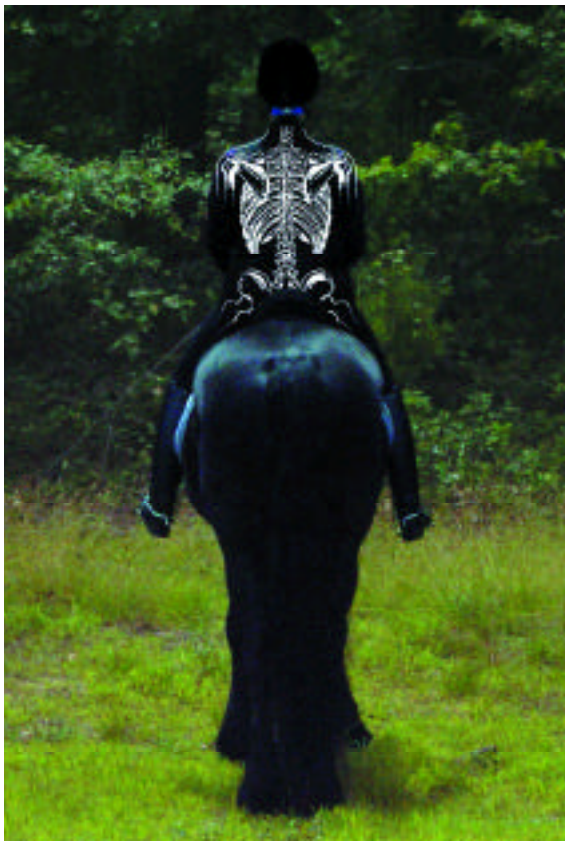
In this article, we'll take a look at the causes of these postural issues, and we'll give you exercises and strategies for easing those aching necks, shoulders, and backs, both in and out of the saddle.

IN PLACE: Just as when you're standing, when you ride your ears, shoulders, hips, and heels should be aligned, as writer Holly Mason demonstrates

Anatomy and Alignment

Even when you sit up straight, your spine naturally possesses a shallow S-curve: The lower-back (lumbar) region curves inward, the rib (thoracic) area curves outward, and the neck (cervical) area curves in again. This curvature enables the spine, supported by ligaments and muscles, to compress and elongate. Its design makes the spine an excellent shock absorber, bolstered by the gel-like discs that separate the vertebrae; and enables you to bend and straighten, twist and turn. Your head is balanced on top of your spine, attached by muscles and ligaments.

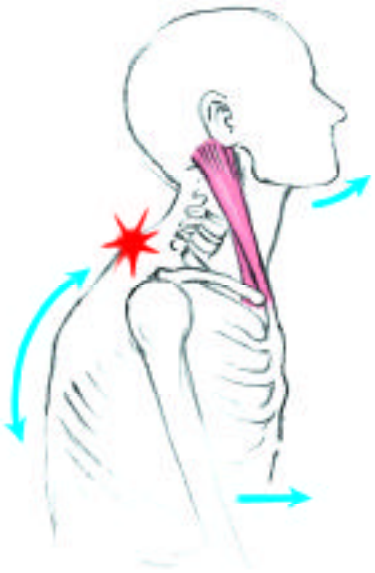
If you sit tall in the saddle with your vertebrae stretched slightly apart and your head centered over



IN BALANCE: The properly aligned rider is easy for the horse's back to support

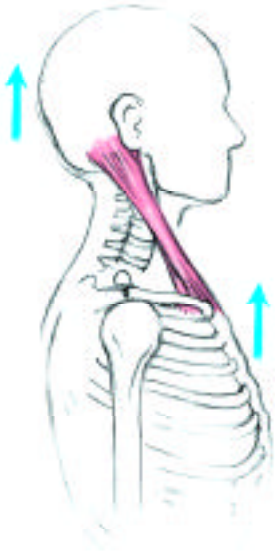
your spine and hips, your body is easy for your horse to support. Your weight falls directly but gently into the center of the saddle, and your joints absorb some of the impact of each stride so that you're not pounding on his back like a dead weight. You feel unblocked and aligned, and so does your horse.

When you deviate from this ideal position, even slightly, you disrupt your horse's balance and may wind up feeling physical discomfort or even pain as a result. Mind you, there's a big difference between normal muscle soreness, which is caused by exertion and eases in a day or two; and joint or soft-tissue pain caused by the stresses of imbalance and misalignment. Know your body and what's normal for you, and consult your physician about any pain that persists or if you have a known medical condition or spinal imbalance, such as scoliosis. Riding shouldn't hurt! That said, let's look at ways that you can address some seemingly minor postural faults before they turn into a bigger problem.



CHIN FORWARD: this posture often causes neck pain

LOOKING DOWN: a contributor to lower-back pain



ALIGNED: a correctly elongated neck creates superior torso balance and spinal integrity

Head and Neck

Problem: looking down. One of the most common rider-position faux pas is the tendency to look down to see what's going on with our horses' heads and necks (see the illustrations above for a depiction of postural do's and don'ts). Not only does this habit spoil an otherwise elegant and erect position, but it also can lead to some serious aches and pains. Here's why.

When you look down, you tip your head forward. To counterbalance the weight of your head, the muscles from the back of your neck to the base of your spine tighten. The muscle tension limits spinal flexibility and therefore causes a loss of some of the spine's shock-absorbing qualities. The horse will feel more weight shift onto his forehand with a consequent loss of impulsion and range of motion in his shoulders. The further forward you tip your head or the longer you look down, the greater the tension becomes. If this habit is chronic, you may wind up with pain in your lower back as a result of the loss of flexibility and shock absorption.

Problem: jutting chin. Some riders adopt a different, and equally unbalanced, head and neck position: They jut their chins out and forward. This posture compresses the base of the skull against the muscles of the shoulders and can lead to pain and stiffness in the cervical region.

Muscles in your shoulders and upper back play an important role in keeping your head and neck aligned. For instance, the sternocleidomastoids (SCMs) run from the skull at the back of the ear to the clavicles (collarbones) and sternum (breastbone) (see illustrations). For your ears to align with your shoulder sockets, the SCMs must elongate. However, as a result of slumping, looking down, and other poor postural habits, most people's SCMs are shortened while the muscles at the back of the head and neck are stretched. Over time, the SCMs, as well as such related muscles as the scalenes (three groups of lateral neck muscles) and the trapezius (a kite shaped group of muscles that run from the base of the skull to the middle and lower back), may become more or less permanently overtightened or overlengthened, thereby making it even more difficult to overcome a head-down or chin-forward habit.

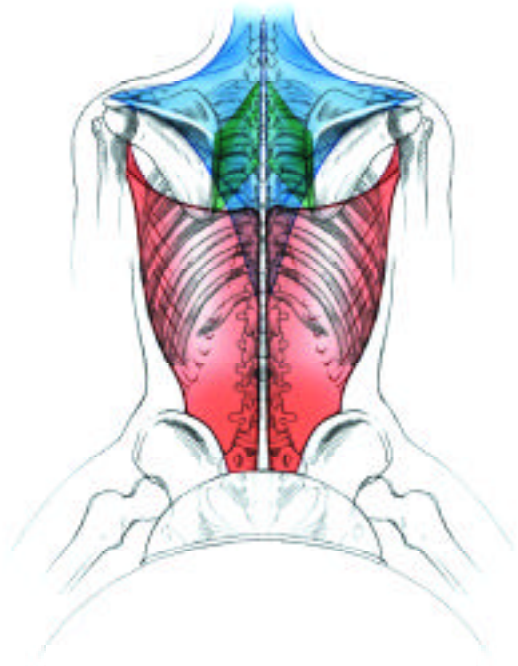
Exercise: Elf ears. This exercise will help you to feel the proper head and neck alignment and also helps to stretch overly tight SCMs.

Grasp the outsides of your ears and gently pull up and backward until you feel your chin retract slightly and the back of your neck elongate. You should feel a stretch down the sides of your neck; that's your SCMs. Take a moment to feel the alignment of your head and neck in relation to your shoulders. Can you reproduce this correct alignment when you let go of your ears?

As you do this exercise, you should also feel your sternum lift and your pelvis move from tipped forward or back into a neutral position. Notice how profoundly your head and neck position affects the position of your entire torso.

ANATOMY OF AN ALIGNED RIDER

There are three major superficial muscle pairs of the back: the latissimus dorsi, the rhomboids, and the trapezius. In this article, we've focused on these specifically rather than all the smaller, deep muscles that run along each side of the spine, as they are the easiest to feel and understand.



The Back of the Neck

The trapezius muscles stabilize the head and neck from the back and look a bit like a kite lying over the upper back. If you contract your shoulder blades together and then stretch your "traps" upward from the tops of your shoulder blades, you'll become taller in your posture and you'll preserve the correct curve of your neck vertebrae and thoracic spine.

Between the Shoulder Blades

The rhomboids control the relationship of the shoulder blades to the spine. Correctly engaged rhomboids keep the shoulder blades together and further enhance the opening of the chest. Most riders have one rhomboid that is overstretched (usually the right) and another that's too contracted, which causes one shoulder to be too far forward and often elevated. shoulder comes a bit back while your outside shoulder comes slightly forward. If you do not have the ability to engage each shoulder back in an ambidextrous way, you will block him from bending equally to both sides.

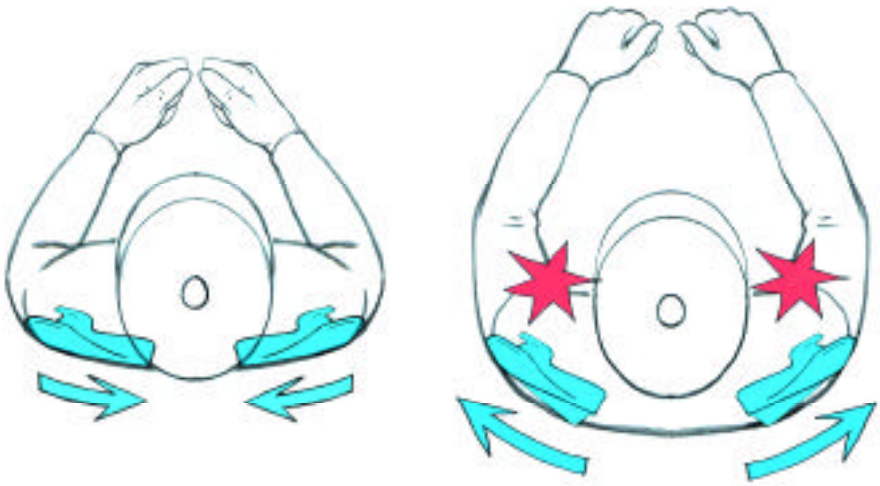
Under the Shoulder Blades

The latissimus dorsi arise out of the low back and fan out over the middle back, crossing over the bottoms of the shoulder blades, with the top portion attaching to the fronts of the upper arms. Because they form part of the armpit, they are essential in keeping the front of the chest open and pectoral (chest) muscles instead of their "lats." Doing so collapses the chest and disengages the back and neck muscles. The horse will win the pulling contest every time if your lats aren't working correctly with your rhomboids and neck muscles.

Shoulders

As we've discussed, the muscles surrounding your shoulder blades help to keep your upper torso and head erect and balanced. The trapezius muscles help to hold your head back and up. If you pull your elbows down slightly, you engage the latissimus dorsi, which are the largest of the back muscles, wrapping around the middle of the back to the front of the upper arms and serving to pull the arms back and down. Good posture entails engaging these muscle groups so that your shoulder blades are pulled back and down, thereby dropping your elbows and bringing them alongside the torso. When your shoulders and elbows are pulled back so that they line up with your ears, hips, and heels, the weight of your arms falls in line with your spine and your shoulder blades flatten.

When you ride in this posture, you feel more connected to your horse's back and to his mouth. You sit "in" instead of "on" the saddle, a much deeper and more secure position. If your horse were to pull on you while you were sitting in this position, he would pull your entire seat (from hips to knees) deeper into the saddle instead of snatching you forward and off balance. You'd be able to sit with your trunk strong and secure while the joints of your elbows, wrists, and hands could open and close softly, "allowing" his free movement and flexing and half-halting him with finesse.



POWER FROM BEHIND: For riders, a strong, stable upper-body position comes from drawing the shoulder blades back and down (left). When these muscles slacken and the chest tightens, often in conjunction with the shoulders rolling forward and the arms carried too far in front of the body (right), the fragile rotator cuffs (starred) can take a beating.

Problem: Shoulders and arms extended too far forward. If you ride with your shoulders and upper arms too far in front of you, your rotator cuffs are forced to absorb the motion created by whatever's going on at the other end of the reins. The rotator cuff is just that: four small muscles that surround the upper arm to stabilize it within the complex shoulder joint. The cuff is not designed to handle the kind of stress that's put on it when the shoulders and arms are extended too far forward. The overuse can lead to tendinitis, which is painful and difficult to treat.

When the shoulders and arms are too far forward, the muscles of the chest and shoulder joint are overused and overtightened. Power in the shoulders comes from employing your back muscles. For riding, we want the pectoral (chest) muscles to relax and open to allow the shoulders to be stabilized from behind. In contrast, other sports emphasize the use of the chest and arm muscles (think about the muscles you'd use to bench-press a heavy weight, for instance).

Problem: Shoulders rolled forward. The thoraic spine (the middle back, between the shoulder blades) is subject to pain if the pectoral muscles are too tight and the shoulders are rolled forward. An overwhelming number of people have this postural fault and the resulting tightness as a result of long periods of time spent driving cars and sitting at desks and computers. Practically everyone needs to help reverse the trend by stretching and opening the chest as often as possible.

It's common for the shoulder blade on a person's dominant side (usually the right) to be rotated forward, which brings the entire shoulder forward and contributes to a slight backward positioning of the opposite seat bone and side of the pelvis. This crookedness makes it difficult to keep your pelvis and hips aligned correctly under your shoulders, and it will lead to crookedness in your horse's body as well.

Exercise: Whole-body approaches. It's difficult to assess your own straightness simply by looking in the mirror. Massage therapists are trained to help in this regard, as are chiropractors and any number of movement specialists, such as yoga, Pilates, or dance instructors. If you have a pervasive issue with crookedness, one or more of these methodologies may help you to loosen tight areas, to strengthen weak and overstretched ones, and to gain the body awareness to be aware of when your posture and alignment have slipped off-kilter.

Some so-called riding problems actually can be addressed out of the saddle. The above mentioned shoulder rotation and corresponding backward positioning of the opposite hip and seat bone, for instance, creates a slightly crooked rib cage that is often inaccurately referred to in the riding texts as a dropped or collapsed hip. The problem, in fact, is a sideways tilt of the rib cage, which causes the shoulders to become unlevel. When the rider learns, through exercise and body awareness, to engage the shoulder blades down against the back, he or she will find it quite difficult to collapse to one side.

MEET THE EXPERTS

A native of England, **Jennifer Cavallaro** (www.jennifercavallaro.com) is a licensed human and equine massage therapist. Now based in Rhode Island, she gives anatomy and movement clinics for riders of all disciplines.

Dressage instructor and fellow Rhode Islander, **Holly Mason** (www.dressagebydesign.com) writes and lectures on human and equine biomechanics. Her video, *Focus on Flexibility*, presents a flexibility program for horses and riders.

No Pain, Much Gain

Neck and back pain are not inevitable consequences of riding. If you feel pain during or after your time in the saddle, take it as a sign that something's not right. Ask a qualified instructor to help identify position flaws that might be the culprit, and remember that even seemingly minor faults, such as a tendency to look down, an inability to keep your elbows properly bent and at your sides, or dropping one shoulder, can lead to discomfort and may be symptomatic of a larger imbalance or misalignment that needs to be addressed. Depending on the source of the problem and your individual physical issues, a fitness trainer, a bodywork specialist, or a chiropractor or other medical expert may be able to assist you in formulating a program or a treatment plan to help you overcome your quirks and crookednesses.

This attention to posture and body awareness can't help but improve your riding. We encourage you to begin thinking of riding in terms of your own alignment and posture, and not simply as a set of aids to be mastered. If you have a clear idea of what you are trying to work on in your own body every time you sit in the saddle, then your schooling sessions will never cease to be challenging. Get as much visual feedback as you can, whether from arena mirrors or from an experienced eye on the ground. Especially as you progress in your riding, you'll thrill to the discovery that minute adjustments in your posture can produce big changes in your horse and show you previously untapped beauty and grace in his movement. ▲