

Do horses get fibromyalgia?

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This is the first in a series of articles on keeping horses healthy and performing well using a whole-horse approach that is based on how the horse is naturally designed to live and function. In this first installment of The Healthy Horse, we'll take a look at what a horse needs to be healthy, through the lens of fibromyalgia.

So, *do* horses get fibromyalgia? The short answer is yes, I think they probably do. Although, given how loaded with judgments this diagnosis is in humans, fibromyalgia is not a term I like to use when talking about horses. (It's also not a condition we vets were taught exists in veterinary medicine. That's no surprise, given that a good many MDs still consider it a bogus disease or, at the very least, a psychosomatic illness mostly of unhappy women. But more on that later...)

Fibromyalgia defined

In medical parlance, fibromyalgia is simply a descriptive term that means pain (*-algia*) involving the muscles (*myo-*) and their associated fascia or fibrous connective tissue (*fibro-*). It is a syndrome that is characterized by chronic pain and excessive tension in the muscles and fascia. The pain and tension may be localized to specific parts of the body, or it may be more generalized. The intensity can range from mild and merely annoying to severe and quite debilitating. And the symptoms may be fairly constant or they may wax and wane (cycle through periods of greater or lesser intensity), depending on what else is going on in the sufferer's life.

When you look at it like that, I'll bet you can think of at least a couple of horses you've known (and perhaps even owned) who fit that description. If not, then start palpating horses' bodies; you'll find that many riding horses have at least a few areas of habitual myofascial tension and restriction, and some degree of discomfort, if not outright pain.

In humans, the specific areas that are most commonly affected include the top and bottom of the neck, temporomandibular joints, between the shoulder blades, lower back, upper thigh and hip, knees and

elbows, and the buttocks. That list almost perfectly parallels the common areas in which horses habitually carry excessive myofascial tension: poll, base of the neck, shoulder girdle, temporomandibular joints, saddle area, lower back, and the muscles of the rump and thigh.

Here's another interesting parallel: irritable bowel syndrome is fairly common in human fibromyalgia sufferers; and some horses who have these patterns of excessive myofascial tension also tend to be prone to low-grade colic, variable appetite, variable manure consistency (e.g. often having soft manure or mild diarrhea), and other nonspecific digestive upsets.

In humans, fibromyalgia is considered to be a multifactorial disorder, meaning that there are many possible causes and contributing factors which, in combinations more or less unique to that individual, feed into the development and perpetuation of the problem. Common, and perhaps even universal, factors include a diet and lifestyle that are unhealthy for that individual, and chronic physical, mental, or emotional stress.

Those same factors are prevalent in modern horsekeeping, and I believe they have a similar impact on the horse's body and mind. Consider how horses are naturally designed to live and how that contrasts with the way most domesticated horses are managed...

Three fundamental facts about horses

There are three fundamental facts to bear in mind regarding horses and horsekeeping—facts which we ignore at the risk of adversely affecting the horse's health, well-being, performance, and even longevity

(certainly career longevity, and possibly lifespan, too).

1. Horses are social animals. In the wild, horses live in close-knit herds or bands, and they form long-lasting social relationships which are important for each member's survival and well-being. They are highly interactive, regularly enjoying mutual grooming, fly swatting, play, and just hanging out together. So, in other words, horses are meant to live together, in intimate association with one another.

In sharp contrast, many domesticated horses are kept physically isolated from one another and, even though they may be able to see other horses nearby, they're given little or no opportunity to interact, for fear that they might hurt themselves or each other. Furthermore, most horses are bought, sold, and otherwise shuffled around from barn to barn throughout their lives without any consideration for the social bonds they may have formed with other horses. (For some horses, being uprooted in this way is just as distressing as being weaned as a foal, and it may be repeated several times during the course of that horse's life.)

2. Horses are grazing animals. There are several aspects to this fundamental makeup that are important:

- The horse's digestive system is designed for fairly continuous intake of high-fiber, low-carbohydrate, low-fat, living plant material (leaves, stems, flowers, seeds/fruit, bark, and roots) that is obtained by foraging for most of the day and night. (Note: grains form a miniscule proportion of the total diet.)
- The horse's metabolism is designed to be effectively fueled by the digestion and assimilation of this high-fiber, low-carbohydrate, low-fat, phytonutrient-diverse diet.
- Horses are designed to move around for much of the day and night, foraging.
- Slow, low-impact movement (walking, some trotting) predominates, with periods of rest and short bursts of athletic activity interspersed throughout the day and night.

- Horses are designed to eat with their heads down (i.e. to eat at or near ground level, except when browsing taller bushes and trees).
- Horses are designed to move from one grazing area to the next, and they avoid grazing near their manure.
- Horses are designed to tolerate all sorts of weather conditions and seasonal variations, adjusting their body fat reserves and hair coat accordingly.

That's a far cry from the way most domestic horses are fed, housed, and exercised! In fact, I believe that this disparity explains a whole host of physical and behavioral problems we consider "par for the course" with horses, including colic, respiratory diseases, exercise-related muscle disorders ("tying up"), laminitis, degenerative joint disease, tendon and ligament injuries, other orthopedic problems, "stable vices," and other undesirable behaviors, just to name the most common ones.

(This aspect of the horse's basic makeup and function is so important that we'll be expanding on and returning to some of the above points again and again over the course of this series. Please let us know if there are any you'd like me to focus on in particular.)

3. Horses are a prey species. Historically, horses were hunted, killed, and eaten by predators (large carnivores and even humans). In fact, in parts of the US where bears and mountain lions are still prevalent, horses must remain on guard against these predators. As part of their protective mechanism, horses have a very broad range of vision (almost 360 degrees around), very good hearing, a very good sense of smell, and very fast reflexes. They are sensitive to sudden movements and sounds, even at a distance, because their survival has depended on it.

In horses the "fight or flight" response, or simply the stress response, has a "hair trigger." However, while this basic protective mechanism is important for survival, it doesn't discriminate between physical and nonphysical stressors, or between real and perceived threats. Regardless of the inciting event—whether physical or mental/emotional—the body's basic response is the same: release the "stress" hormones (adrenaline, cortisol, etc.) for an immediate survival response, and deal with the consequences later.

If the stressor is of short duration, then the body quickly returns to equilibrium once the stressful event has passed. However, if the stress is chronic or unpredictably repetitive, then the body remains in “alarm” mode, the consequences of which include compromised immune function, tissue repair, digestion, sleep or rest cycles, and numerous other normal bodily processes that are put on the back burner during the “crisis.”

(The autonomic, or automatic, functions of the nervous system are broadly divided into two categories—sympathetic and parasympathetic—which counterbalance each other in a neat yin-yang dynamic. The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for the stress response—“fight or flight”—whereas the parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for restoring a state of relaxation—“rest and digest” or rest, repair, and renew. Horses who are chronically stressed stay in a state of imbalance in which sympathetic tone predominates.)

Lack of normal social interaction is one common stressor that many domestic horses must deal with. Another is the way we humans approach our dealings with horses. Traditionally, most humans who interact with horses unwittingly do so in a predator-prey dynamic, with the human (the “predator”) dominating and demanding submission of the horse (the “prey”). Even when it’s done with patience and kindness, conventional horsemanship is the art of exacting submission of this naturally free-spirited animal. When you factor in a fourth point—that the horse’s body is not designed to carry a rider—it is little wonder many horses develop habitual patterns of excessive myofascial tension!

The highly sensitive individual

Back to humans and fibromyalgia for a moment. I may be really wide of the mark here, but I suspect that many fibromyalgia sufferers are what clinical psychologist Elaine Aron, PhD terms “highly sensitive” people. These are folks who are highly perceptive but who have not yet figured out how to deal with all the unwanted stimuli that bombard us, from without and within, every moment of our lives. As a result, they literally embody their distress—they manifest physical symptoms of their mental or emotional stress. (Of course, an inappropriate diet, environmental toxins, and other physical factors play a role in most cases; but if they were the primary

factors, then correcting or eliminating them should resolve the problem, and typically it doesn’t.)

Perhaps I’m oversimplifying a complex condition; then again, perhaps at its core it really is that simple. The term *psychosomatic* then takes on a deeper—and truer—meaning. Rather than implying that the illness is “all in your head,” the term reminds us of the inextricable interconnection between the mind (*psyche*) and the body (*soma*), a connection which runs both ways: mind⇌body, with the emotions providing the common language. (If you want to read more about this topic, I highly recommend *Molecules of Emotion: why you feel the way you feel* by Candace Pert, PhD.)

What all this has to do with horses is that I consider horses as a species to be “highly sensitive.” In the wild, their very survival depends on them being highly sensitive to each other and to what’s going on around them. Those natural and appropriate instincts have not been lost in domesticated horses, no matter how much we may try to train them out of our horses. Unfortunately, when we manage horses in what, for them, is an unnatural way, primarily to suit ourselves (whether for convenience, pleasure, comfort, economy, ego gratification, or tradition), this natural way of being can set a horse up for chronic *dis-ease* which, sooner or later, manifests physically as what we recognize as disease.

It’s true that many horses seem to cope well enough with typical domestic conditions (confined to a stall or small paddock, fed an unnatural diet, allowed limited grazing and limited opportunity to develop normal social relationships with other horses, etc.). However, I believe it’s ultimately at the expense of their health, well-being, performance, and even their longevity. We just assume that arthritis, other chronic degenerative diseases, and eventually organ failure are an inevitable part of growing old, when in fact they are largely preventable. They represent a lifetime of tiny insults and cumulative damage to a system that is designed to be self-repairing, but which has its limits. (Now we’re talking about the difference between *surviving* and *thriving*.)

As with humans, some horses seem to be more sensitive (or perhaps that’s just less well adapted) than others and are therefore less tolerant of these suboptimal living conditions. These are the horses

who develop vague gait abnormalities (e.g. stiffness, resistance), other training/behavioral issues, or medical conditions that defy conventional diagnosis and treatment and even many alternative therapies. One must go to the source of the problem and *adequately address the horse's basic needs* to restore health and well-being in these horses.

(By the way, the upside of having one of these highly sensitive horses is that they are extremely perceptive and responsive, and so if you can figure out what they need in order to be healthy and happy, and manage them accordingly, you have yourself a really great horse!)

Two highly sensitive horses

In closing, let me tell you about a couple of horses I have in my practice whose bodies eloquently bespeak their intolerance of social disorder and, in the process, demonstrate that psychosomatic illness is very real in horses. By most people's reckoning, both horses are well loved and well cared for. They live in well maintained boarding barns and are fed a high-forage, low-grain diet, along with high-quality multivitamin-mineral supplements and various herbal or nutraceutical supplements. They are on adequate deworming, dental, and hoof care programs, too.

Both horses have their own stall in a barn with several other horses, and they get at least a couple of hours of pasture turnout with at least one other horse every day. While both are in training with professional trainers, they are primarily used for pleasure riding, so their training is fairly basic and could not be considered anything more than "light."

Sounds pretty good, right? Well, their bodies say otherwise. Both horses cycle through bouts of digestive upset—loose manure, picky appetite, lethargy, and sometimes low-grade colic—that have no clear pattern other than coinciding with changes in the horse's housing or social situation. For example, one of the horses (a mare) develops loose manure whenever she is confined to a stall. She is better when kept in a stall which has a paddock attached and the external stall door remains open. She is best when kept at pasture with compatible company.

Consistently, whenever this horse has a digestive upset, she also develops muscle spasms, a stiff gait, and is lethargic and unwilling to work. Her person

even commented during one of these episodes that her poor horse looks like *she* feels when her fibromyalgia flares up! (By the way, this sharing of symptoms between horse and rider is not at all uncommon. But that's a fun little side trail for another time.)

The other horse (a gelding) has similar bouts of loose manure/diarrhea and vague malaise whenever he's upset. Case in point: he recently had an episode of diarrhea when his best buddy (with whom he is turned out every day) was confined to a stall because of an injury. It continued until his bud was once again able to be turned out with the others.

I use medical intuitive evaluation in my practice, along with more conventional means of diagnosis, so I feel comfortable that we hadn't missed anything with regard to the possible physical causes of these symptoms. A sense of emotional disorder was very strong when I evaluated both of these horses, and I felt that the solution to their physical problems lay in that direction.

As the mare was still having problems, despite changes to her diet, turnout, and exercise regimen, her person recently decided to move the mare to a different boarding facility, one where she would have virtually unlimited pasture turnout with compatible company, and none of the stresses of her previous training/boarding barn. Within hours of stepping off the trailer at her new home, the mare was a different horse! Her muscle tension was gone, and she cantered around in her new pasture as happy as a lark. Her manure has been well formed since the move, too. She may continue to have episodes of her old trouble from time to time; but rather than seeing it as an on-going problem, these bouts can be used as a sentinel, a signal that something is not quite right in her world and needs to be addressed.

There are many possible causes of abnormal muscle tension, gait restriction, and digestive disorder in horses. I'm not saying that these symptoms are caused by fibromyalgia or are psychosomatic in all cases; just that this possibility should be considered when no other physical cause can be found and all appropriate improvements have been made to the horse's diet, housing, and exercise regimen. Consider the horse's fundamental needs and do as much as you possibly can to meet them. Your horse will be healthier and happier for it.

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This article was first published in the September 2005 issue of Horses, Inc. (<http://www.horsesinc.com>)