

## Understanding Back Pain & Kissing Spines in Horses

### A Guide for Horse Owners and Equine Clients



Back pain is a common but often overlooked issue in horses. It can affect performance, behaviour, comfort, and overall wellbeing. One of the most recognised causes of chronic back pain in horses is Kissing Spines Syndrome — a condition many owners hear about but may not fully understand. Lumbar back pain can also be secondary to Sacro-iliac pain in the joints between the final part of the spine and the pelvic bones.

**This newsletter explains how kissing spines and Sacro-iliac pain may present and the options available for diagnosis and treatment.**

#### What Are Kissing Spines?

The horse's spine is made up of a series of vertebrae with upward-pointing bones called dorsal spinous processes. In a healthy horse, there is space between these bones. With kissing spines, the spaces between these processes become narrowed, and the bones may touch or overlap. Kissing spines most commonly affect the thoracic (mid-back) region beneath the saddle area.

This contact can cause:

- Inflammation
- Pain
- Muscle tension
- Reduced flexibility
- Secondary behavioural issues

#### Common Signs of Back Pain

Back pain can appear gradually and may initially be mistaken for training or behavioural problems. It can be difficult to separate one source of pain clearly from others, and in many cases, there may be multiple issues that affect how a horse moves including hind limb lameness, saddle fit, rider ability and work load.

#### Signs owners may notice:

- Resistance when saddling or grooming
- Bucking, rearing, or bolting
- Difficulty engaging the hindquarters
- Reluctance to jump or collect
- Stiffness when turning
- Hollowing the back
- Muscle loss along the topline
- Sensitivity to touch over the back
- Bunny hopping, incorrect or disunited canter leads
- Visible pelvic as Some horses show only subtle changes in attitude or performance symmetry

#### What is Sacro-Iliac pain?

Sacroiliac (SI) pain in horses is a common source of poor performance, hind-end stiffness, and low-grade lameness. Affecting the crucial connection between the spine and pelvis, it often stems from trauma, arthritis, or compensation for other hind-leg issues. Recovery requires a lengthy rehabilitation period

#### Common Symptoms

SI issues rarely cause obvious, overt lameness. Instead, riders often notice subtle, progressive changes in movement

#### What Causes Kissing Spines and Sacro-iliac pain?

Several factors may contribute to the development of kissing spines:

- Conformation
- Certain horses naturally have closer spinal processes, or weak backs with poor support

- Workload & Training
- Poor posture, incorrect muscle development, or repetitive strain can increase pressure on the spine.
- Trauma
- Falls, injuries and twisting can damage the sacroiliac joint
- Saddle Fit
- An ill-fitting saddle may create pain and muscle tension, worsening back problems.
- Weak Core Muscles
- Weak topline and abdominal muscles reduce spinal support.
- Previous Injury
- Trauma or chronic compensation from lameness elsewhere can affect spinal movement.

### Diagnosing Back Pain & Kissing Spines

A full veterinary assessment is essential because many conditions can mimic back pain.

Your vet may perform:

Clinical examination

Palpation of the back muscles and spine

Dynamic assessment (watching the horse move)

Flexion and ridden evaluation

Nerve blocks or local anaesthesia

Because the Sacro-iliac joint is buried deep within large muscle masses, detailed X-rays are usually impossible. Diagnosis relies on a combination of

Deep palpation of the croup and surrounding back muscles.

Ultrasonography to view the joint capsule and ligaments.

Diagnostic nerve blocks, where local anaesthetic is injected into the region to see if the horse's movement improves

#### Imaging techniques include:

Radiography (X-rays) – commonly used to identify narrowed or overlapping spinous processes

Ultrasound – useful for evaluating soft tissue structures

Scintigraphy (bone scan) – sometimes used in complex cases

Importantly, not every horse with X-ray changes will show pain. Diagnosis must always match the

#### Treatment Options

The good news is that many horses improve significantly with appropriate treatment and management.

- Conservative (Non-Surgical) Management
- Physiotherapy & Rehabilitation
- Targeted exercises help strengthen the topline and improve posture.
- Controlled Exercise Programs
- Correct schooling and gradual conditioning are key.
- Saddle Assessment
- Proper saddle fit is essential to reduce pressure and discomfort.
- Medical Therapy

Your vet may recommend:

Anti-inflammatory medications

Corticosteroid injections

Physiotherapy & Manual Therapies

May support comfort and mobility when used alongside veterinary guidance and practised by a qualified professional

## Surgical Treatment

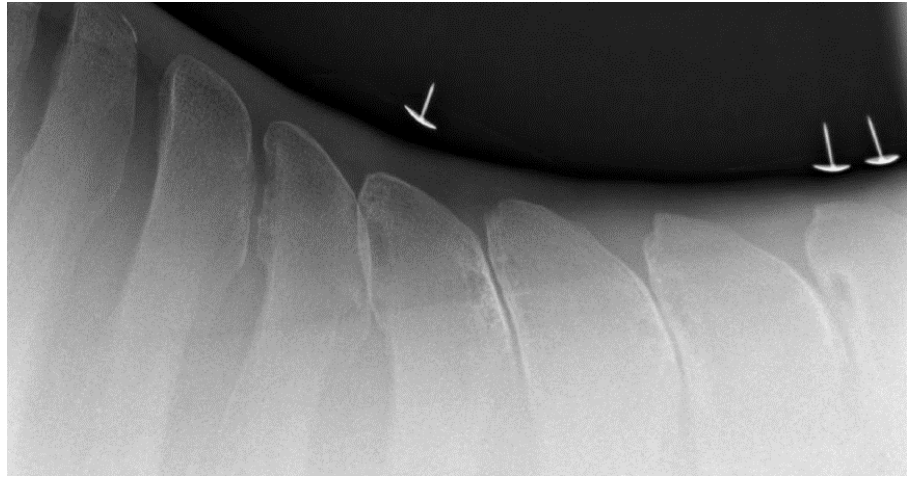
In more severe or persistent cases, surgery may be considered for kissing spines.

Common procedures include:

Interspinous ligament desmotomy (cutting the ligament between affected processes)

Partial bone resection

Many horses return successfully to work following surgery and rehabilitation.



## Rehabilitation Is Crucial

Whether treated medically or surgically, rehabilitation is one of the most important parts of recovery.

Successful rehab usually includes:

Core strengthening

Long and low work

Pole exercises

Gradual return to ridden exercise

Consistent physiotherapy support

Recovery takes time, but patience and structured management often lead to excellent outcomes.

## When Should You Contact Your Vet?

Speak to your vet if your horse shows:

- Persistent behavioural changes under saddle
- Ongoing poor performance
- Unexplained stiffness or resistance
- Pain during grooming or saddling
- Recurrent issues despite training adjustments

Back pain is rarely “just bad behaviour.” Identifying discomfort early can make a significant difference to your horse’s comfort and long-term performance.

## Key Takeaway

Kissing spines and Sacro-Iliac pain are a common cause of equine back pain, but they are manageable. With accurate diagnosis, appropriate treatment, and a dedicated rehabilitation plan, many horses can return to comfortable and productive work.

If you have concerns about your horse’s back health, contact your veterinary team for advice and assessment.

Need Advice About Your Horse’s Back Health?

Please contact our clinic to discuss assessment, imaging, physiotherapy support, and rehabilitation options

**Contact us: 01297 304007**

**Summerleaze@summerleaze-vets.co.uk**



Summerleaze\_equine



Summerleaze equine vets