

# Kissing Spines

## TOO COMMON

**B**ack pain is a common complaint, often associated with a performance limiting factor in sport horses. The most common reported pathology is impinging dorsal spinous process, more commonly known as kissing spines.

Turner, one of the world's leading experts, found in a 2011 study that 39% of horses have kissing spines, however it does not cause problems in all horses. This figure is quite significant and suggests the special attention owners should give to their horses' backs.

Kissing spines is obviously not a recent problem! A Polish archaeological researcher's team found that horses from the 11th and 12th centuries had kissing spines due to excessive load on the back.

In research I conducted last year, in partnership with the IAAT (International Association of Animal Therapists), many horse owners believe the origin of kissing spines is due to poor riding practice and horses being put to work too young. It is true that quickly putting the horse in a frame by sometimes adding numerous gadgets is an aggravating factor, however, there are also issues concerning the ergonomics of the equipment, including the saddle.

*by Marc Beaussart,  
Dip/PG Dip EO, MIAAT, MT  
MIRVAP, MIAVRPT, FEI PET*

*Based in France, covers France, Belgium and UK*

*w: [www.equusphysiocare.com/en/home](http://www.equusphysiocare.com/en/home)  
Instagram: @equusphysiocare*



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Although the true underlying cause of kissing spines is not yet fully understood, a very recent study, conducted in 2022, discovered a genetic variant associated with the severity and development of kissing spines in horses. Certain breeds are also known to be more susceptible to developing the syndrome, such as thoroughbreds.

The veterinarian is called because there is a drop in performance, a loss of impulse, a change under the saddle, defiant or even aggressive behaviour or lameness. We must not forget that the horse's back functions a bit like a suspension bridge and therefore problems affecting the back can have repercussions on different areas of the animal's body (and the opposite is also true). Often the diagnosis involves an x-ray of the horse's back confirming the spinous processes are either too close or touching. In some cases, overlapping.

Treatment can vary depending on the country the horse resides, but we tend to find intramuscular or intra-articular injections and mesotherapy are used. If these treatments fail, owners may be referred for possible surgical intervention such as ligament snips or resection of the dorsal spinous processes. There are also therapeutic techniques which are non-invasive and very effective including manual actions (massage, stretching and mobilisation) and using different tools such as cryotherapy, laser, TENS, PEMF, ultrasound and others.

Photograph and x-ray of racing thoroughbred stopped because of severe kissing spines

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According to Turner, the most important aspect of any treatment regime is the exercise program. Exercise must achieve the goals of the horse moving freely forward in a relaxed frame.

Consequently, kissing spines syndrome can be a result of poor conformation coupled with the demands of the discipline the horse works in, and inappropriate riding techniques. Saddle fit, rider technique and exercise regimes should be carefully evaluated and monitored to help prevent kissing spines syndrome.

Questioning of the practice of horse riding and horse work in general must be frequent. Was the warm-up sufficient? Is the gymnastic work regular enough and appropriate for that horse?

We should never generalise either, each horse is unique. Like human athletes, sufficient and appropriate preparation is necessary before participating in any sporting action to avoid risk of injury. Too short or irregular training is then a risk factor for back pain linked to kissing spines. This is even more true if you own a horse whose genetics, breed and work history make them more likely to develop kissing spines.

**Cornille ([scienceofmotion.com](http://scienceofmotion.com)) says 'Competent equitation is the horse's best therapy'**