



## HOW YOUR HORSE BREATHES

DURING respiration air comes up through the nostrils and into the nasal passageway which is made up of the bones of the cranium. Air then passes into the throat latch area which includes the larynx or trachea – a tube made of cartilage which is flexible like a vacuum hose. Finally the air is inhaled into the lungs with the help of the diaphragm. The horse breathes with its 18 ribs expanding with each breath and the attached diaphragm muscle stretches to push air out of the lungs. This allows the lungs to take in their full capacity of air, and therefore oxygen, to feed the muscles.

For respiration to be optimal each part needs to be soft and free from restriction or muscle tightness. When damage occurs to any of these parts this will affect the horse's ability to breathe and therefore his competitive performance.

### Underlying issues

Damage can occur to the nasal bones from nosebands being cinched too tight, while the trachea can become tight through a tongue being pulled over during a dentist's visit or by a horse pulling back or overflexing at the poll. An ill fitting saddle or over galloping can affect the muscles connecting the ribs to the limbs, diaphragm, jaw and head which will impair the lungs' ability to fill fully.

People often put the blame on a lack of conditioning or undertraining when a horse feels flat in work. However, these factors are often caused because the horse is experiencing tightness throughout the areas of respiration, making the simple process of breathing laborious. Nasal strips are sometimes used to aid respiration but they do not address the underlying cause of cranial compression.

### Things to look for

If your horse is showing any of the symptoms above check each part of his respiratory system – firstly the nasal portion. Is the structure of his head and face symmetrical? Notice any damage. Dents, lumps or unevenness between the eyes indicate compression to this area which will be shown by the horse snorting or blowing out during exercise.

Secondly check the throat latch area. When soft and supple the trachea's correct position should be by the angle of the jaw. Take note if this area is muscularly underdeveloped or tight. With your fingers gently touch each side of the trachea to see if it moves from side to side or sits softly in the throat latch. If you cannot feel it, or it does move gently, this indicates tightness in the muscles. A horse with tightness here will generally make a roaring sound or grunt during exercise.

Lastly check the ribs for tightness or restrictions. Use your palm to push lightly on the ribs. They are designed to give under pressure. If they feel like cement, or braced, this indicates that they are restricted in respiration. And as you watch your horse breathing the whole ribcage should move and expand, not just the belly.

### What to do about it

Optimal lung capacity is vital for overall health and performance in an event horse. Shortness of breath, fatigue or lethargy are all indicators that a horse has compression or tightness compromising his respiratory system. But these issues can be addressed, such as by equine craniosacral therapy which is designed to treat each of these parts of respiration. Four-star eventer Sharon

## CHECK YOUR HORSE FOR WARNING SIGNS

- Tired or lethargic when working
- Makes sounds – grunting or snorting – when working
- Ties up
- Problems – short breaths and long periods of recovery after exercise
- Use of nasal strips
- Dorsal displacement of the soft palate (DDSP) or gurgling or roaring

Hunt is a big-name devotee, with dozens of others lyrical about the relief it has given their horses.

Sarah Taylor-Jepp's 15.3hh part-Thoroughbred Thomas Patey began to struggle with his fitness when she upped his work for CCI\*\* level. Sarah completed a course in equine craniosacral therapy last April and has been "amazed" by the effect that sessions have had on 'Tom.'

"His breathing is more relaxed as it has cleared his airway," she says. "In layman's terms, you feel for restrictions and try to release them so that the horse's head can take in more air. He can see, hear, smell and breathe better – and he seems much happier in himself."

Sarah was prevented from putting Tom's fitness to the test last season due to the wet weather but she is convinced that his breathing problems are behind him.

Tom also had a tendency towards headshaking which Sarah puts down to an ear injury he suffered as a young horse. However, the therapy has alleviated this too.

"He very rarely headshakes since the therapy," she says. "I was never really sure exactly what all the different therapies available do but craniosacral is the best thing I've found. I use it on all my horses now, whether or not they have any problems." ■



The breathing of Sarah Taylor-Jepp's Thomas Patey is more relaxed thanks to craniosacral therapy

- For more information or to find a practitioner, visit [www.equinecraniosacral.com](http://www.equinecraniosacral.com).