

Tacoma Equine Hospital

3112 – 156th Street E. Tacoma, WA 98446 ♦ 253.535.6999

EQUINE CHIROPRACTIC CARE

Dr. Tricia Arnold has recently become certified by the International Veterinary Chiropractic Association (IVCA) to perform Animal Chiropractic. The theory and practice of this powerful modality can enhance both the performance and overall health of your horse.

What is Animal Chiropractic?

Animal Chiropractic is a manual therapy focused on restoring and maintaining the health of the nervous and musculoskeletal systems. The basic chiropractic theory is that biomechanical dysfunction of the spine affects the function of the nervous system. **Chiropractic certainly does not replace traditional veterinary medicine**; however, it is an additional means of diagnosis and treatment for spinal problems as well as musculoskeletal problems. Chiropractic can often eliminate the source of acute or chronic pain syndromes.

The Spine

In the horse, there are 52 vertebrae and nearly 200 joints. The spine is a complex structure consisting of bones, ligaments, muscles and nerves. It provides a framework of support for the body, flexes and extends to allow the body to move, and protects the spinal cord and internal organs. Each joint in the horse's spine moves only a few millimeters, but when added together these small movements sum to allow the horse the flexibility to jump over four-foot fences, bend around a barrel at high speed, or scratch his rump with his teeth.

The spinal cord sits in the center of the vertebrae to connect the body to the brain. Nerves branch off from the spinal cord and transfer information between the brain, spinal cord, organs, muscles, and other parts of the body. As the central nervous system monitors and controls all organ and tissue function, the transmission of information to and from it must flow freely to allow proper function.

What is a vertebral subluxation complex (VSC)?

The simplest way to think of a vertebral subluxation complex (VSC) is “stuckage”. Two vertebrae in the spine are not moving as well as they should be in relation to each other—hence, they are stuck.

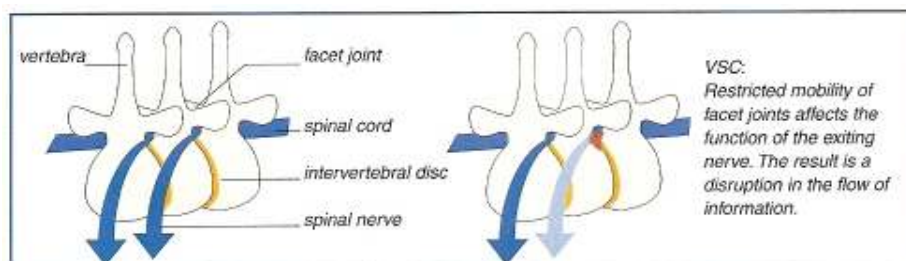


Illustration of a VSC. The spinal cord is the "information highway" allowing the transmission of information between the brain, muscles, skin and all organs.

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The result of a VSC is that the animal loses normal flexibility in that portion of his spine. He must compensate for this lack of movement by overflexing a different part of his spine. This causes him to use more energy and engage different muscles than he would if his spine were working properly. If the vertebrae remain stuck, over time this will negatively affect the horse's performance and lead to more VSC's and subsequent compensations.

Common causes of Vertebral Subluxation complexes

Every day most horses are exposed to situations which can cause damage to their spine.

The following examples could cause VSC's (subluxations):



• **Trauma:**
Caused by falls, trips, slips or being cast in the stable.



• **Performance:**
Every event strains the spine in a different, specific way.



• **Narcotics:**
The entire general anesthetic process can cause back problems.



• **Rider:**
Problems with the rider's seat (e.g. a crooked seat) can lead to back problems in the horse.



• **Transportation:**
Long transportation times, accidents, poor shock absorption in the trailer and unsympathetic driving can cause damage.



• **Shoes:**
Poor hoof care and incorrect shoeing interfere with the horse's movement resulting in subluxations of the spine.



• **Birthing difficulties:**
Difficult births where the foal is forcibly extracted can cause problems in both the mare and the foal.



• **Saddle:**
Poorly fitting saddles are one of the most frequent causes of back problems.



• **Lack of movement:**
Lack of space in which to move does not give the horse enough opportunity to ease tension by bucking or rolling.



• **Age:**
As age increases the effects of previous small and/or large traumas to the spine become more apparent.

What are the signs of VSC's?

Animals with back pain and VSC's can show their discomfort in many different ways:

- decreased performance
- subtle personality change
- tail swishing
- difficulty flexing poll
- difficulty flexing long and low
- bucking

The signs the animal shows depend on location of pain, intensity of pain, and the horse's personality.

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How can a VSC be corrected?

An animal chiropractor identifies a VSC during an examination, and aims to restore mobility to the vertebral joints. To put it quite simply, the chiropractor makes “stuck” joints “unstuck”.

Correction is made via a quick, short thrust along the plane of the joint. This is called an adjustment. The adjustment moves the affected joint past the point where it is stuck, but NOT outside the normal anatomical range of motion of that joint.

Is Animal Chiropractic safe for my horse?

Veterinarians and chiropractors certified by the IVCA (International Veterinary Chiropractic Association) or the AVCA (American Veterinary Chiropractic Association) have gone through extensive training courses where safety of the horse is a primary concern. They are taught to adjust using primarily “short-lever” techniques in which the hands are placed directly on the affected vertebra and the adjustment is aimed in a very specific plane for that joint.

In contrast, “long-lever” techniques are less safe because they are non-specific, can affect several joints at a time, and are much more likely to take a joint beyond its anatomical range of motion. IVCA and AVCA-certified doctors are not taught to adjust using long-lever techniques or with any tool other than their hands.

What can I expect from a chiropractic appointment?

The chiropractic examination will start with a discussion of your horse’s medical history, your concerns about his current performance, and your expectations for him. The musculoskeletal system will then be evaluated for symmetry, heat, swelling, pain, and muscle atrophy. The animal will then be motion-palpated to identify VSC’s, which will each be treated with a chiropractic adjustment.

All animals respond differently to chiropractic treatment. Many will show improvement almost immediately, while others will take 24-48 hrs before they achieve full benefit from the adjustment.

Illustrations courtesy of International Veterinary Chiropractic Association

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