

Care and maintenance of the Ventroflexed (Hollow Backed) Horse
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Corto

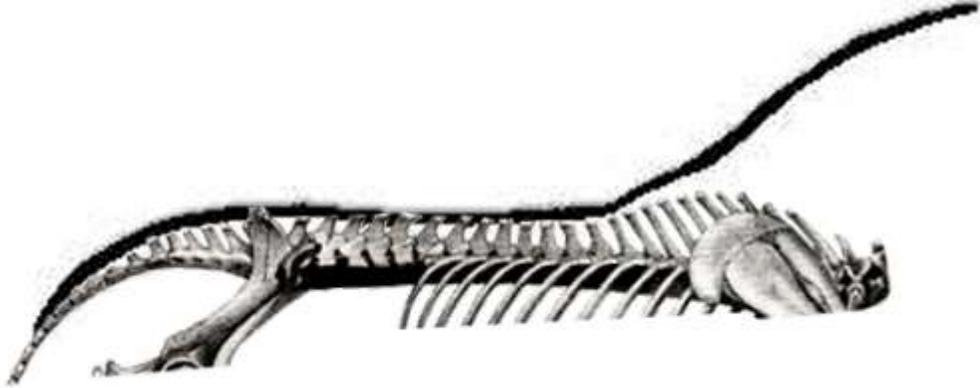
Photo © Darlene Wohllart

All of us in the gaited community have or will at sometime own, ride or witness horses with ventroflexed gaits. Some are desirable and some are not. Some are natural in that they have the structure to be so and some horses are forced into this carriage and frame. It is also very common to see in an aged horse or a horse that has produced many foals through the years.

It is rather important that we recognize the evidence of the ventroflexion in a horse and maintain these horses for future soundness and well being in hopes of continued performance and a long healthy life. The ventroflexed back is very common to see in our gaited horses but is also seen in the trotting breeds as well and the maintenance for them is just as important.

What is ventroflexed ?

The carriage or presence of a horse with a back that is hollow or concave. These horses tend to have higher head carriage due to higher set necks coming out of the shoulders. Other structural elements can add to this being, longer backs, sickle hocks or camped out behind.

	<p>Spinal column with level Back.</p>
	<p>Spinal column with ventroflexed Back.</p>

Common Gaits of Ventroflexion

Pace
 Stepping Pace
 Rack
 Stepped Rack
 Corto
 Largo
 Sobreandando
 Tolt

What we can do.

It is our job to know when a horse is naturally this way and should have a regular maintenance program to keep them strong and not over stressed to perform their desired gait efficiently and correctly. It is also our responsibility to know when we the riders are forcing a horse to be more ventroflexed than necessary or to know when a horse is being asked to ventroflex but is not meant to do so structurally.

It is very common to see our horses started at a much younger age than in years past. This has not been done for the good of the horse but for what many want for the good of themselves. The

reasons often include impatience to ride a horse, to produce a marketable horse started under saddle for profit or a show animal for both previously stated reasons.

This is the first place that we can make a difference in these horses. Wait until they are physically mature enough to carry themselves, tack and a human without over stress. At any age, we should be aware just how much a horse should be able to carry comfortably. It is very common to see a horse carrying too large of a rider and when that rider has incorrect equitation this makes the job of the horse even more stressful. At any age, a horse should be in condition to do what we ask. Getting a horse up in the spring after a winter off and going for even a 2 mile ride holding any gait for too long can cause stress or damage to a horses soft and/or hard tissues. Take the time to condition the horse over time and build its strength to be able to do the task at hand.

Asking a horse to drop its head at a standstill, with and without a rider, helps condition him. Additionally, from time to time, asking a horse to learn to go with its head lower at a walk is a good way to help build the muscles on each side of the spine by raising the back. Nature made its own way to help a horse. Grazing causes the head to be low to forge for food, thus raising the back and stretching the neck. We can help this by feeding our horse at ground level not in feeders raised in pastures or stalls.

We should also know how long a horse can hold gait for a specific time without stress and be brought back down to a walk between intervals of gait. It is a very common sales pitch any more to hear that these horses can hold these gaits all day long. This is just not so, yet some may do it for us. It was never meant for a horse to do so.

**Rule of Thumb for gaiting:
(with correct equation and weight carried)**

- * hold gait for 3-7 minute
3 TIMES an hour
- * walk in-between.

This time can vary for several different reasons:

Maturity of Horse: Use less time gaiting on the younger horse and more on a mature horse with all the muscle and bone fully fused and developed.

Natural Muscle Amount: Some horses naturally lack enough muscle to support their skeletal frame to hold gait and a rider for the longer periods. These tend to be a flat muscled horse not round muscled horse.

Light Boned Horse: Some horses are lighter boned and can be stressed easily with a rider. If they are a rounder, heavy muscled horse with the light bone, this is more all around for them to carry.

Time 3 minutes and see just how long it really is. Let your horse and common sense be the gauge, not what you personally want of that horse. If a horse is not up to ever doing the task, we do not have the right horse. Be realistic about that specific horse. For some people, no horse can meet what some expect. Or they can, for only a limited time, and then start to break down. At this point a horse becomes used up and disposable to be replaced by another to go through the same fate.

Other helpful maintenance.

- Regular massage work, and if needed, chiropractic work should be done.
- [Belly lifts](#) help as well. When a horse does get stressed not only does back discomfort become evident but neck, shoulder, hip and leg problems can become evident over time.

Belly Lift:

Application of a 4 fingered pressure, placed 4 inches in front of the umbilical stump pressing gradually but firmly. To subtly cause the horse to tighten the abdominal muscle to create a slight lifting of the ribs and spine to strengthen the back muscles and relieve spin pressure.

- Keeping a good exercise program such as [bending and flexing](#) and some regular lateral exercises always help maintain a horse and can always be made fun for you and the horse. Many can be done from the ground as well as astride. It also makes for a much better trained horse than one that just goes forward fast. A better trained horse always stands out above the rest.

At some point, with age and/or suspicion of stress over time one should be aware of hock stress. X-rays in later years can help to see at what point a horse may need special supplements to help possible bone friction or loss of joint lubrication which can be common of those horse that are over or improperly used. It is my experience to see some arthritic development in horses even as young as 4 due to what is being asked of them at an early age.

A Case History



Stepping Pace



Rack

Above are 2 photos of the same horse. Obviously this horse is multi gaited in being able to do a stepping pace and the gait of rack. This horse is 18 years old and was at one time a padded up show horse. Chance are this horses muscle memory by this time is very set toward being more to the lateral gaits as was indicated by the present owner. The present owner is very happy with this horse and finds the gaits very smooth and a great horse to work with and ride.

I would not allow this horse to go as far as a 2 beat lateral pace.

The reason for not allowing this horse to do a 2 beat pace:

- First can cause a horse to stay closer to a 2 beat gait in timing rather than holding a 4 beat gait with consistency such as this horses stepping pace or rack.
- Second the lateral swing from one side of the body to the other in the 2 beat gait of pace is much harder on the body possibly causing muscle and joint strain.

The pace is a gait created by a tense stiffening of the muscles throughout the body. But if the 4 beat stepping pace are the gaits of this horse, then this horse is doing what it should. However it should have a regular maintenance program to keep the body strong.

The running walk may never be in this horse but having a good dog walk and flat walk will help relax and strengthen this horse to do its gaits with less stress. I would also recommend if the horse is not used to going at the slower speeds of the walks, take this horse to a smaller area where speed cannot be achieved and teach this horse to put its head down and relax . This also means the rider truly asking for this by being relaxed themselves as well. It may help to go to a shorter shanked bit, or even better a snaffle (no shank, no curb), if control can still be maintained. When a horse is corrected with a long shank bit then the immediate response is to raise the head which we do not want. Also a bit of the length shown can easily ask a horse to go

stiffer and more hollow than necessary to maintain the desired gait.

This horse is a good example for a good maintenance program and still have many great years of use and fun for him and his owner. The longer a horse can be kept sound and strong the easier the later years into the age of 20's and 30's can be for a horse.

Closing Statements:

Have fun with your horse if the ventroflexed gaits are what they are meant to do. Keep regular maintenance going before any evidence of stress or strain happens and your horse should continue to perform for a very long time.