

HELP! My horse is cold-backed

OUR EXPERT PANEL



JENNIFER TAYLOR
Jennifer is a qualified physiotherapist and treats elite human athletes – including riders – as well as horses. She has a BSc (Hons) in

Physiotherapy, an MSc in Sports and Exercise Medicine and a PG Dip in Veterinary Physiotherapy. Jennifer covers the North West and North Wales. Visit: www.pegasusphysiotherapy.co.uk



JUSTINE HARRISON
Justine is a certified equine behaviourist who applies the science of behaviour and learning to help owners solve a wide range of

issues with their horses. She is the UK chair of the International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants. Visit: www.equinebehaviourist.co.uk

Q My horse is showing signs of being cold-backed, and tries to buck me off as soon as I'm in the saddle. He settles down after about 15 minutes of work. Can you tell me more about this condition and how I can resolve it?

Name and address withheld

JUSTINE SAYS The term 'cold-backed' is often used to describe horses who have a sensitive back. They react when the saddle is placed on their backs, as the girth is fastened or when the rider gets into the saddle.

These reactions can be quite diverse. The horse may flinch or move away from the saddle or rider, hollow or tense the back, fidget or refuse to stand still or bite whoever is trying to tack them up. Eventually the horse may perform very extreme behaviours like kicking out, bucking or even bolting.

Often, the reason for these behaviours is pain. Therefore, it is vital to rule out any physical problem by having your horse checked over by an equine vet or a qualified veterinary physiotherapist.

A horse could also be behaving this way because they are anticipating a painful

experience. Horses are very good at remembering something that has hurt them. So, if your saddle has caused your horse pain in the past, even if the issue has been resolved and the saddle now fits correctly, he may continue to behave the same as he's expecting it to hurt him.

Horses may be tense when tacked up or mounted as they are fearful of being ridden. They may have had a traumatic experience when ridden previously – perhaps they have been hurt by insensitive riding or experienced an incident that frightened them.

These can be complex issues to resolve but a qualified behaviourist can help you improve your horse's associations with their tack to be more positive, as well as resolving any ridden problems you may be experiencing.

To avoid problems like these occurring:

- Arrange for your horse to have regular vet and physio checks;
- Ensure your tack fits well and is checked by a qualified saddle fitter regularly;
- Tighten your horse's girth up a hole at a time, to accustom him to the feeling;
- Take training slowly – don't rush your horse or ask too much too soon;
- Seek appropriate advice to address any ridden issues you may be having;
- Recognise when your horse has been frightened and seek appropriate advice.

JENNIFER SAYS Cold-backed is a frequently used phrase to explain a horse exhibiting certain behaviours or symptoms.

Although some of these reactions and responses are commonly associated with back pain in horses, cold-backed is not a diagnosis of back pain in itself. However, these horses are often in pain



Cold-backed is a term used to describe a horse that exhibits certain behaviour, such as bucking

and need investigating by a vet to rule out conditions such as 'kissing spine' and sacroiliac joint inflammation.

The vet may also want to rule out lameness, teeth or feet problems and medical conditions like gastric ulcers during their clinical assessment.

The typical sign of a cold-backed horse is when the horse dips from the pressure of the saddle or the rider.

Other signs include discomfort when the girth is tightened or reluctance to be mounted from the floor. Hollowing of the back or bucking until the horse is warmed up are other problems people commonly associate with a cold-backed horse.

In mild cases, the horse's behaviour may only change when they are due to be tacked up or when being groomed. Twitching of the back muscles or flinching when pressure is applied to the saddle area may also be seen.

Once the vet has ruled out medical conditions, the management of a cold backed horse will often involve input from an equine physiotherapist and saddler.

They will address some of the underlying factors including an ill fitting saddle, muscle spasm, joint stiffness, and provide rehabilitation exercises to mobilise and strengthen the horse's back. An ACPAT (www.acpat.co.uk) physiotherapist will also be able to assess and

treat the rider as back pain in the rider can have an effect upon the riders position in the saddle.

The most important thing with a cold-backed horse is to try and establish the cause and understand that horses are normally in pain when they show these behaviours.

Steps to prevent the above signs and symptoms of a cold-backed horse include:-

- Regular saddle fitting checks as the horse

changes shape through training or weight loss/gain;

- Regular equine physiotherapy to assess and treat any muscle tightness, spasm or movement restrictions;
- Improve rider fitness and balance;
- Don't tighten the girth straight away;
- After tacking up, walk the horse around the yard for a few minutes.
- Always get on using a mounting block. ■



Have your horse or pony's back checked regularly



Put the saddle on the horse a few minutes before you intend to ride him