by Dr Craig Simon  
BVSc (hons) GPCert(Eq) M CySc (Eq Surg) CMAVA
All Horses Veterinary Services

...why does my horse drag in its hindlimbs?

by Lesley Goff Animal Physiotherapist  
Active Animal Physiotherapy Equine

A horse with altered gait resulting in hind toe dragging, especially in both legs, will firstly need a veterinarian to check for neurological disorders such as Wobbler's (cervical congenital malformation), before any other examination or treatment is carried out. Neurological disorders result in the horse having decreased perception of the whereabouts of the hind legs, termed altered proprioception. Weakness, which can be also due to neurological disorder, is revealed by inability of the horse to balance on one hind leg, or inability to correct a perturbation such as being pulled sideways via the tail. Weakness and altered proprioception can result in hind toe dragging.

Observing the horse’s gait can reveal asymmetry of movement, such as decreased hind limb flight arc, which may give the appearance of dragging that toe. Hock pain can result in decreased flight arc, and is diagnosed via hock flexion test, and either nerve block or imaging. Lack of propulsion, one of the signs of sacroiliac injury can result in decreased flight arc, along with a battery of other signs including bone/muscle asymmetry, and sacroiliac ligament atrophy, which can be imaged with ultrasound.

Horses with locking stifles can have the appearance of dragging the hind toe especially walking down hill, due to inability of horse to 'unlock' the patella to allow normal stifle flexion. Horses with pelvic stress fractures may present similarly to sacroiliac joint injury, often with marked muscle wasting plus or minus toe dragging, and may be diagnosed with ultrasound. Correct diagnosis of the cause of hind toe dragging is imperative as management of each of the above mentioned conditions differ.

by Christine Scully  
Australian College of Animal Tactile Therapy

Dragging of the hind limb in horses can be due to a number of factors, which may have a muscular or structural basis. Some common issues I find that contribute to or cause the problem are below:

1. Problems in the biceps femoris muscle, this hindquarter muscle exerts its effect on both the hip and stifle. With problems here the horse will tend to scuff the hock during forward movement and the stride may be shortened.

2. Lumbo-sacral issues: Should the horse have a muscular problem in the area of the croup the action of tucking the hind quarter may be reduced which will in turn reduce the horse's ability to turn and place the hind feet in all gaits.

3. Primary back problems, especially those that affect the lumbar region. If the horse has back pain it will attempt to protect its back – just like you do when you have back pain, the effect of this on the hind limb can result in dragging of the hind limbs. Here checking the saddle, and the rider balance is of great importance.

4. Primary forelimb problems: in the presence of pain during forelimb stance phase the horse will avoid transferring the weight forward during movement – which in turn increases the weight on the hindquarter and reduces the ability to pick up the hind feet.

5. Hoof balance is also a major factor – so ensure your horse’s feet are balanced prior to assuming you have other problems or treatment is carried out.

Craniosacral work traditionally specialise on the skull, spine and sacrum, restoring postural balance and fluidity of biomechanics.