

Factsheet: Equine wobbler syndrome

Wobbler syndrome is not a specific disease, the name is given to a group of conditions which arise as a result of compression of the spinal cord within a horse's neck. The name derives from the affected horse's abnormal stance and movement.

Fact sheet information

The full name for conditions commonly referred to as 'wobbler' is cervical vertebral stenotic myelopathy (CVSM).

The horse's spine

A horse's spine runs from the back of the head to the rear part of the back. The spine is made up of individual bones called vertebrae. The vertebrae provide protection for the spinal cord as it runs along the spinal canal. Vertebrae in the neck are called cervical vertebrae, those in the back are thoracic, lumbar, and sacral vertebrae according to the specific region of the back. The spinal cord contains nerves running between the brain and the legs - these nerves are involved in controlling leg movement and awareness of leg position relative to the body.

What causes 'wobbler' syndrome?

CVSM results from narrowing of the spinal canal in the neck.

Wobbler syndrome is most likely to be seen in younger horses while they are still growing. However, it may also be seen in older horses as a result of arthritis affecting joints between cervical vertebrae.

What are the signs of 'wobbler' syndrome?

The compression of the spinal cord affects the passage of messages along the nerves between the brain and the legs. This means that the horse may experience leg weakness, have less capacity to control its legs and/or be less aware of leg position relative to its body.

Symptoms may include toe dragging and stumbling as a result of weakness, uneven gait, difficulty changing lead at canter, standing abnormally or with difficulty or even spontaneously falling over. Usually, hind limbs are more noticeably affected than fore limbs. Symptoms may range from subtle to severe, depending on the degree of spinal cord compression.

If you notice un-coordination in your horse, it is essential that you arrange examination by a vet. While you are awaiting the vet's examination, avoid riding your horse and be especially careful while handling the horse to minimise risk of injury to the horse, to people and others around the horse.

How is wobblers syndrome diagnosed?

The first stage in diagnosis is a neurological assessment, which is likely to include examining the horse standing, walked in hand in a straight line and walked in tight circles in both directions. The aim of the examination is to assess the extent and severity of the symptoms and to rule out other causes of neurological disease such as degenerative problems, a tumour, or an abscess. Radiographs of the neck, with the horse standing sedated, enable the vet to look for malformation of the cervical vertebrae, other bony abnormalities, and any misalignment of the vertebrae. If plain radiographs are inconclusive injection of contrast medium into the area around the spinal cord and imaging to view the area affected may be required to enable the affected area of spinal cord to be identified.

What treatment options are available and what is the prognosis?

Anti-inflammatory medications may be used to reduce swelling around the spinal cord and manage associated pain. If the horse is young changes to diet may be recommended to reduce growth rate and box rest/reduced exercise may be recommended. It is unlikely that medication alone will result in long term improvement in the condition. If radiographs show arthritis in the neck (this is more likely in older horses than younger horses) corticosteroids may be injected into the joint but repeated treatment may be required and sustained improvement is unlikely.

Depending on the cause of the problem, the severity of the symptoms and age of the horse, surgery to fuse the vertebrae affected using a metal basket across the unstable joint may be considered. However, this is a major and expensive procedure, the recovery period is long and there is no guarantee that the horse will improve sufficiently to return to a working role.

We'd really value your support

Communities For Hoses works tirelessly to improve the welfare of horses through working closely with their owners to educate and support them.

We believe that prevention is better than cure and that through education we can achieve better outcomes for horses and their owners.

If you've found this factsheet useful, then perhaps you would consider supporting us, either with a one-off gift or as a regular giver.

Any amount, great or small, would be gladly received, even if it's just to buy our hard-working welfare office a cup of coffee or half a tank of petrol.

We need your help to:

- Cover veterinary bills
- Buy equipment
- Cover petrol and transport costs
- Pay our welfare officer
- Run our education programmes

<https://www.communitiesforhorses.org/support-us>

There are a lot of other useful resources on our website, so please take the time to have a browse, and subscribe to our newsletter:

<https://www.communitiesforhorses.org/subscribe>

<https://www.facebook.com/community4horse/>

**Please share this factsheet with anyone
you think may find it useful**