

What is chiropractic?

Chiropractic is a therapy that is used to primarily treat disorders of the musculoskeletal and nervous systems. The purpose of a chiropractic adjustment is to identify and restore joint mobility in joints that have become hypomobile or restricted in their movement. The hypomobilities (decreased ranges of motion) may be caused by a single incident such a fall on a ride or can be from repetitive daily stresses like carrying a rider or even just abnormal posture from conformational issues.

Every joint in the body has a normal active range of motion but also an elastic portion past the normal range that allows it to sustain force without damage to the bones themselves. Not only can normal range of motion become decreased with average wear and tear, disuse or injury but the elastic portion can also become less effective even in a sound horse if it is not reinforced with normal activities to maintain flexibility. When this elastic portion stiffens or the normal range of motion decreases we call this a subluxation complex, or Vertebral Subluxation Complex (VSC) when referring to the spine. The bones are not "out of place", just "stuck" within the normal range of motion. They can also be stuck center, left, right, up or down depending on the joint.

O.K., the joint has decreased range of motion and is stuck, so what? Can't they fix it on their own moving around?

The answer is yes and no. If that trauma doesn't happen again and the animal is given rest, quite possibly yes. However, around the borders of each joint are nerves, vessels and muscles. The VSC may impinge on the nerves and vessels around it causing decreased nerve firing and blood flow which can slow healing. In addition, the muscles often spasm around the site, holding the joint in the abnormal position and creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

What if the "trauma" is because they have straight hocks, or an imperfectly fitting saddle or even the basics like being forced to be an equine athlete while carrying a rider?

Obviously some stresses are mild but may even be worse if continuous. With chronic decreased nerve firing and prolonged low grade muscular spasming, true lameness can occur. Regular chiropractic maintenance can actually help prevent lameness for this reason by keeping the body in balance or can treat compensations from lamenesses that are already occurring.

So how can little Dr. Carmen affect the spine of a 1200 pound animal?

Good question and one I had myself in the beginning. The word chiropractic comes from the greek words practikos, done by, and cheiros, hand. The chiropractic adjustment is a high velocity, low amplitude thrust in the exact plane of the joint. The reason it is so powerful is like the difference in you getting a nail into a solid piece of wood by pushing on it with all your might rather than swinging a hammer. An adjustment works because it is following the exact plane of the joint like using a guidehole for the nail and the rapid, twitch-like motion of the thrust is like a precise swing by a master carpenter. Because I am simply using my hands, it is also very safe as the "guidehole" of the joint goes away at the end of that elastic barrier so the joint virtually cannot be pushed "too far". For this same reason the results are often far more profound than massage and physical therapy stretches because, although they are excellent in maintenance of range of motion, they act only on general regions.

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Will my horse like it?

Just like the relief of a stiff finger or wrist after you have "cracked" it, even if some horses question what you are doing in the beginning, they quickly begin to relax as they start feeling the relief. Sometimes with severe muscle spasming it may be slightly uncomfortable but even so, most horses seem to understand that you are helping them and allow you to work into the painful area from both ends as you get the spasming to subside. However the horse does have to "allow" you to adjust them. If they are nervous or very painful it may take several sessions to get the same results but with time even my most uptight horse now virtually falls asleep in the crossties during our sessions.

How often will my horse need to be adjusted?

It depends. Prevention and maintenance visits may only be once or twice a year, but after a traumatic incident or when in strenuous work the sessions may need to be once per month or even more frequently depending on the severity. Also remember, if your horse has a true lameness, although the adjustment will help with compensations, the true cause of why the horse is getting VSC's will need to be identified and treated or else the cycle will continue.

I hope this clears up some of the misconceptions out there and helps you to understand more about this great treatment that I have been interested in for so long. I have also listed some common signs that may suggest that a horse may need an adjustment below. If you feel your horse may benefit from an adjustment or if you have more questions please feel free to give me a call!

Abnormal posture
Discomfort or resentment of saddling
Sensitivity to touch
Reduced level of performance or difficulty collecting
Missing leads
Difficulty flexing or turning
Interfering or pulling shoes
Evasion issues such as bucking, head tossing, etc.
Asymmetry of gaits