

# Equine massage for TMJ problems

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*Photo courtesy of Stephanie Reeves.*

**An aligned and flexible temporomandibular joint is vital for you impacting his digestion, neck, back, balance and more. Massage to restore proper function in your horse's TMJ.**

A correctly-functioning temporomandibular joint (TMJ) is essential to your horse's overall well-being. Any other problem in his TMJ affects not only his ability to chew, but also his digestion, his balance, the function of his neck and back. Equine massage is an effective way to help your horse's TMJ get back to normal function.

## **TMJ anatomy**

To understand your horse's TMJ and how it impacts his health, it's important to be familiar with its basic anatomy.

In the simplest of terms, the TMJ connects the mandible (jawbone) to the temporal bone (which forms the side of the head). The joint is divided into two compartments separated by an articular disc. The lower portion is a hinge joint that allows the horse to open and close his mouth. The upper portion is a sliding joint that allows him to move his jaw from side to side as well as forward and backward.

Like most joints, the TMJ is surrounded by a joint capsule filled with synovial fluid, and mobilized and stabilized in turn, rely on proper muscle contraction and relaxation in order to work correctly. This area, along with the rest of the mouth, through it. The TMJ is packed very tightly, so any inflammation can cause extreme pain because there is no room for the cause, TMJ issues can start as minor discomfort and progress to a constant and severe headache.

## **TMJ issues – causes and effects**

Problems with a horse's TMJ can have more than one cause.

- Trauma is certainly one, and can result in subluxation (misalignment) or sepsis (infection) in the joint.
- Horses can get arthritis in the TMJ as a result of dental issues. Horses spend many hours a day grazing and if there is an imbalance in the mouth, it will put undue stress on the TMJ.
- Issues such as a bit that doesn't fit properly, incorrect balance in the feet, and poor saddle fit can also contribute to TMJ problems.

TMJ dysfunction is believed to be more common than we realize, so it's a good idea to be aware of the signs and symptoms and consult your veterinarian if you suspect a problem.

Common clinical signs include pain on palpation of the TMJ or manipulation of the jaw, an enlargement of the joint (observed from the front) and atrophy of one or both masseter muscles.

It is also wise to periodically observe your horse as he eats. Horses chew in a very rhythmic, smooth manner. If you notice your horse chews, or see him dropping feed or tilting his head while eating, or if you find any asymmetries in his jaw, have your veterinarian investigate. If your horse suddenly starts to shake his head, carries his head differently, or shows any of the other signs of TMJ issues, TMJ issues need to be ruled out.

## **Addressing TMJ problems**

Once a diagnosis is made by your veterinarian, there are a few ways to address the issue, depending partly on the cause.

If a dental imbalance is the culprit, rectifying it is the top priority; anything else will only act as a temporary measure. Inflammation, anti-inflammatories can be given temporarily to help reduce discomfort.

In cases of arthritis, corticosteroid injections can be administered into the joint to reduce inflammation. If a chiropractor can help resolve it.

Addressing the teeth and TMJ itself may not completely resolve the problem, however. As mentioned previously, a healthy TMJ function, and these can remain tight and cause problems on their own.

## **Massage for TMJ**

Massage can be a very useful tool for helping to restore proper function to the TMJ, as well as addressing the compensatory issues that occur as a result of any issues. Gentle work right around the joint, as well as jaw mobilizations (carefully moving the jaw side to side), can help release a lot of the tension that builds up in the area. Horses usually lower their heads, blink more, or lick and chew when this area is addressed. Some will even slide their jaws side to side on their own before mobilizations are performed. Many of the muscles in the face, primarily the masseter, can be quite tight and harbor trigger points that need to be released in order for chewing to return to normal.

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Tension in the jaw can travel further down the body, since a rigid jaw prevents the horse from being loose. The neck (particularly the poll) and back (all the way to the sacrum) are often also affected. This is the reason it is recommended to address TMJ problems as thoroughly as possible, even when the area of concern is quite localized. It is important to address any areas of concern at the end of a treatment.

## Why is the horse's TMJ so important?

It can be easy to overlook just how important the TMJ is to your horse's overall health. We already know that a properly functioning digestive tract, but correct mastication is a crucial first step in this process.

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Horses spend much of their time grazing and chewing. Not only is chewing correctly, it can also cause quite a bit of stress and discomfort. Having a horse who softly accepts a bit and flexes comfortably is an important no matter what discipline you focus on. A locked jaw can lock up the body, stiffening it up. It doesn't matter how much leg you add or how you micromanage the horse's body – if the TMJ is locked on one side, the horse can't move straight or use his body correctly.

Due to its location, its innervation, and its proximity to the brain, the TMJ can cause balance and body awareness issues, since this area has functions similar to the human ear. For all that, it is an important body part to be aware of!

Keeping your horse's TMJ working properly entails knowing the signs of a potential problem, having the correct tools, and including **massage** as a way to help restore correct function in any affected areas.

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