

FASCIA AND THE EQUINE ATHLETE

Form, Function, and Balance

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We all know the importance of keeping muscles, tendons, and joints healthy. An issue with any one of these can impact the overall health of the body, and if there is too much tension in one area, the body will compensate in others, creating discomfort or injury.

And yet there is another component of the body that has the power to affect movement, circulation, and well-being: the fascia.

Fascia plays an essential role in balancing the body – and when the body is out of balance it can't function optimally. Re-balancing the body improves athletic performance, which is key for all horses, as they are all athletes!

Fascia is connective tissue made of collagen. It wraps around every part of the body: muscles, organs, and joints. It blends with ligaments and even provides attachments for some muscles. In some cases it even encases each muscle fibre. It is everywhere in the body and it is completely interconnected in one piece from head to foot.

Fascia looks like a densely woven spider's web

and is filled with nerves, blood and lymph vessels, and adipose (fat) tissue. It has multiple roles in the body. It provides support, protection, and shock absorption, and it also acts as a medium for cells to communicate with each other. Depending on its location, it can be thick or thin.

(DIY anatomy lesson: the next time you're preparing chicken, note the thin webbed layer of white that attaches the skin to the meat, or the thicker layers that separate sections of meat in the drumstick – that's fascia!)



Observe the ridges on the shoulder, abdomen, and below the withers. This is called “fascial banding”; these ridges are occurring along specific muscles and indicate significant tension.

One of the most interesting things about fascia is that it can take on the properties of either a gel or a liquid. It can feel very firm, or soft and flexible. To do its job of protecting the body, it remodels itself in response to physical stress, dehydration, and even emotional trauma. For example, a horse that pulls back when tied up may strain his neck muscles beyond what they are capable of at the time. After the injury, the fascia will stiffen around the muscles to support them as they heal, and protect them from potential future injury. Even after the muscles have healed, the fascia will stay tight, because it doesn't know that what happened was a one-time accident. When ridden, the rider may find that the horse struggles to bend properly. This horse may also show uneven movement in the pelvis or hind limbs, as the body attempts to function within comfortable limits and compensate for the restriction in the neck. That's why it's so important to pay attention to fascial health; a localized problem in one area may in fact mean that other areas need attention too.

This type of situation can happen to any horse: a jumper lands awkwardly and jars a joint, an eventer stumbles over uneven terrain and strains a tendon, or a dressage horse learns a new exercise that incurs repetitive stress on muscles.

Fortunately, fascia can be remodelled in positive ways too. Bodywork is essential in releasing restrictions and creating a balanced body that the athlete can use to perform even better. The Bowen modality, a neuromuscular re-patterning technique, is particularly effective in working with fascia. It works by stimulating neural receptors in the fascia, encouraging the nervous system to enter a parasympathetic state where it can rest and process. This gives the body maximum opportunity to use its own self-healing powers to repattern

the neuromuscular connections. Because the nervous system is so sensitive, only a gentle touch is required. This gentleness by-passes the body's instinctive response to resist forceful touch – the “hurts so good” sensation of deep tissue massage does not apply here.



This 5 year old dressage-bred gelding was asked to stand squarely before and after a single bodywork session to release the fascia. Note the dramatic change in posture and balance; imagine how much his performance will improve.

Bowen for humans has been adapted for use in horses by Equi-Bow Canada. Equi-Bow combines knowledge from multiple modalities including Bowen, Cranio-Sacral, Feldenkrais, myofascial release, and more. Effects of Equi-Bow techniques include more symmetrical muscles or movement patterns, changes in behaviour, and fascial remodelling. It acts as a complimentary support to veterinary medicine.

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