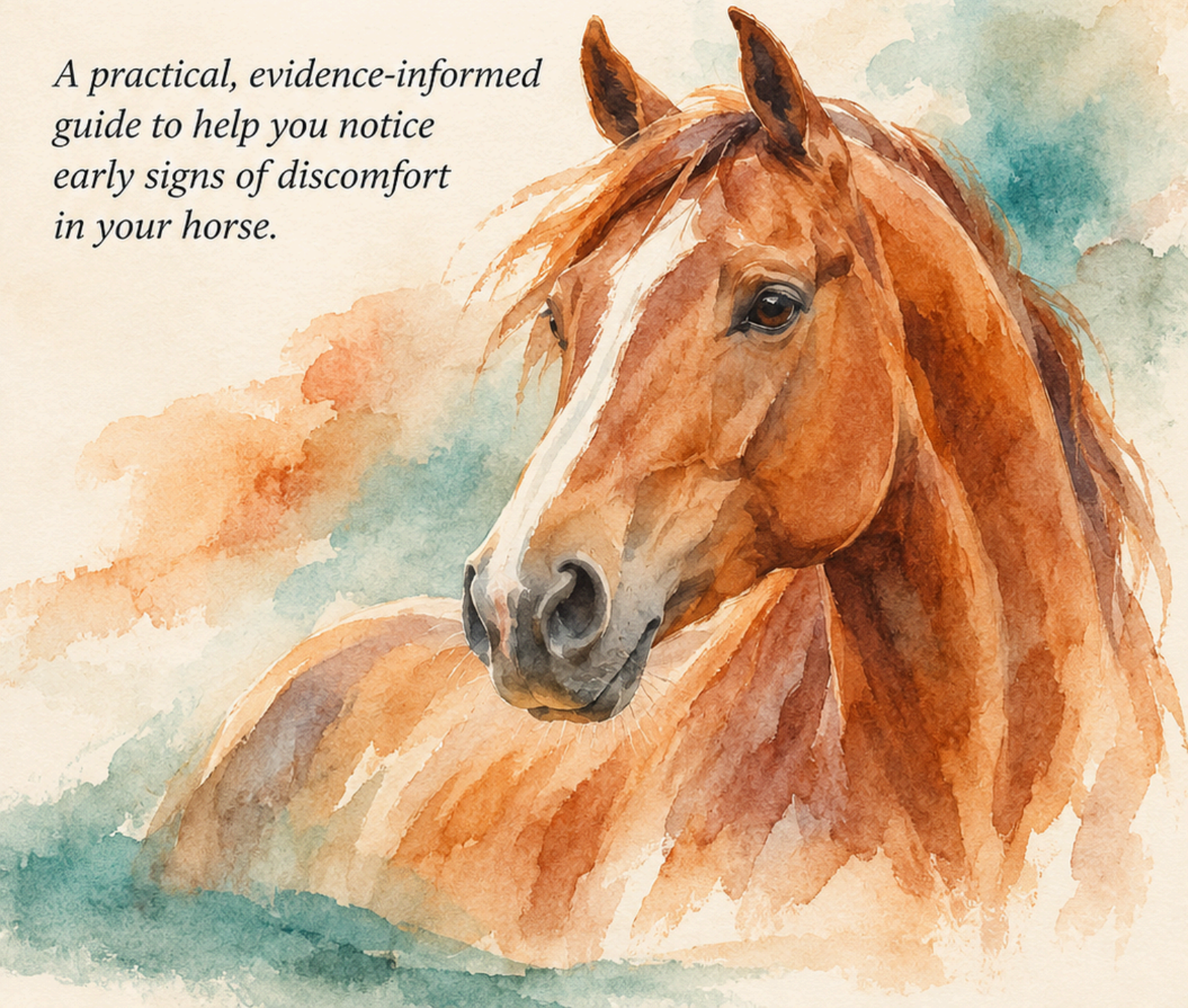
Gingiberi Equis

EQUINE BODYWORK

7 Subtle Signs Your Horse May Be Uncomfortable

A practical, evidence-informed guide to help you notice early signs of discomfort in your horse.



Start by noticing what changes

Horses differ in how they express discomfort. An unfamiliar reaction, a persistent change or several changes appearing together may justify closer investigation. These signs are not specific to pain: training, fear, management, environment and illness can also influence what you see.

1. Facial expression

What you might notice

Unusual tension around the eyes, muzzle or jaw; altered ear position; a facial expression different from your horse's usual appearance.

Why it matters

The Horse Grimace Scale identified six facial features associated with acute postoperative pain in a particular research setting. Facial expressions also change with attention, fear and the environment; the scale is not a universal diagnostic test [1].

What to do

Observe your horse at rest in familiar surroundings. Look for repeated changes alongside other signs rather than interpreting one photograph.

2. Movement and rhythm

What you might notice

Shorter or uneven strides, altered rhythm, difficulty turning or transitioning, stumbling, or reluctance to move forwards.

Why it matters

Musculoskeletal pain can alter loading and produce compensatory movement. The most noticeable asymmetry may not indicate the original source; movement asymmetry is not always caused by pain [2].

What to do

Record short videos on a safe, level surface. New or persistent gait changes warrant veterinary assessment; do not exercise through suspected lameness.

3. Posture and weight distribution

What you might notice

A new standing pattern, persistent weight shifting, consistently favouring a limb or difficulty settling comfortably.

Why it matters

Postural control combines proprioceptive, visual and vestibular information. Horses naturally adjust their stance and often rest a hindlimb. A particular posture alone cannot identify a specific condition [3].

What to do

Compare your horse's natural stance across several days and note whether movement or behaviour has changed too.

Notice reactions during everyday handling

4. Grooming and touch

What you might notice

Moving away, flinching, muscle tension, repeated tail swishing, ears pinned back or defensive reactions during familiar grooming.

Why it matters

Touch perception, nociception and pain are different processes. Responses can reflect pressure, skin sensitivity, fear, previous learning or discomfort. A grooming reaction cannot establish a muscle lesion or nervous-system sensitisation [4, 5].

What to do

Use gentle, consistent handling. Note the exact location and circumstances; do not repeatedly press a reactive area to test it.

5. Tacking up

What you might notice

Avoiding the saddle, reacting to girthing, becoming tense during bridling or showing new defensive behaviour when equipment is presented.

Why it matters

Equipment contact and pressure, physical health and learned associations may all contribute. Research describes girth aversion as a non-specific clinical sign: it does not establish gastric ulcers, back pain or poor saddle fit on its own [6].

What to do

Record when the reaction starts. Seek veterinary advice when discomfort is suspected, and involve appropriately qualified saddle or bridle/bit fitters where relevant.

A horse standing quietly is not proof of comfort, just as a horse reacting does not reveal the underlying cause.

Changes during work and daily life

6. Behaviour under saddle

What you might notice

New reluctance to go forwards, repeated head movements, unusual tail activity, difficult transitions, bucking or other changes from familiar ridden behaviour.

Why it matters

The 24-behaviour Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram (RHpE) is associated with musculoskeletal pain when applied in a structured assessment. In studied populations, scores of eight or more were strongly associated with pain, but lower scores do not exclude it [7].

What to do

Stop ridden work if pain is suspected and arrange veterinary assessment. Do not use the RHpE as an informal diagnosis by counting unwanted behaviours.

7. Everyday behaviour and temperament

What you might notice

Withdrawal, irritability, altered social interaction, reduced activity or changes in eating, drinking or resting.

Why it matters

Discomfort can affect demeanour and activity, but these signs are not specific to pain. Health, stress, environment, social relationships and management can influence behaviour [3].

What to do

Compare with your horse’s usual routine. Record persistent changes and discuss them with your vet; marked lethargy, colic signs or sudden appetite changes need prompt advice.

The question to ask

Rather than immediately asking “How do I stop this behaviour?”, consider: “What has changed, and what might be influencing my horse’s response?”

Your printable observation checklist

Tick anything that is new, repeated or noticeably different from your horse’s normal behaviour. A tick is a prompt to investigate, not a pain score.

- ☐ Facial expression looks different
- ☐ Stride, rhythm or movement has changed
- ☐ Standing posture or weight distribution is unusual
- ☐ New sensitivity during grooming or touch
- ☐ New defensive reactions during tacking up
- ☐ Ridden behaviour or willingness has changed
- ☐ Everyday behaviour, appetite or social interaction has changed

Observation diary

Date	What I noticed	When / where	Other changes

Useful notes to record

Frequency, duration, handling or exercise involved, surface, equipment, recent changes in management, and photographs or videos where safe.

When to seek veterinary help

Arrange veterinary assessment for new, persistent or unexplained gait changes, sensitivity, behaviour changes or suspected discomfort. Seek urgent veterinary advice for severe or sudden lameness, inability to bear weight, colic signs, collapse, significant neurological changes or serious injury.

Do not use massage, stretching or exercise to treat an undiagnosed condition. Equine bodywork may support comfort and management where appropriate, but does not replace veterinary diagnosis or treatment.

Research and further reading

[1] Dalla Costa E et al. (2014). Development of the Horse Grimace Scale. PLOS ONE 9:e92281. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0092281

[2] Weishaupt MA (2008). Adaptation strategies of horses with lameness. Veterinary Clinics of North America: Equine Practice 24:79–100.

[3] Torcivia C, McDonnell S (2021). Equine Discomfort Ethogram. Animals 11:580. doi:10.3390/ani11020580

[4] International Association for the Study of Pain. IASP terminology: pain, nociception and sensitisation. iasp-pain.org/resources/terminology/

[5] Rochais C et al. (2023). Horses' tactile reactivity differs according to the type of work. Animals. pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9959874/

[6] Millares-Ramirez EM, Le Jeune SS (2019). Girthiness in horses: a retrospective study. Journal of Equine Veterinary Science. doi:10.1016/j.jevs.2019.05.025

[7] Dyson S, Pollard D (2020). Application of a Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram and its relationship with gait in 60 riding horses. Animals 10:1044. doi:10.3390/ani10061044

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