

Understanding Kissing Spines



What Is Kissing Spines?

Kissing spines, or overriding dorsal spinous processes, is a condition where the dorsal spinous processes (the bony projections extending upward from each vertebra) in your horse's back come too close together—in some cases touching or overlapping. The limited space between the spinous processes restricts back movement and can cause pain when the bones interfere with one another. Kissing spines typically occurs in the thoracic (mid-back) vertebrae where the saddle sits on the horse's back.



Clinical Signs

The signs of kissing spines vary significantly but can be physical, behavioral, or performance-related. These might include:

- Poor performance.
- Reduced range of motion.
- Painful reaction to back palpation.
- Resistance to being saddled or mounted.
- Cross-cantering.
- Bucking when ridden.
- Unwillingness to work “round,” engage the hindquarters, or perform downward transitions.
- Topline muscle atrophy (wasting).
- Asymmetrical muscle development.

Note that many of these signs can be subtle or attributed to other issues like

saddle fit, so work with your veterinarian to make an accurate diagnosis.



Diagnosis

Veterinarians typically use clinical signs and radiographs to diagnose kissing spines. They might also use ultrasound, bone scans, or nerve blocks. Radiographs, however, are the best modality for evaluating the distance between the spinous processes and identifying bone issues such as cystlike lesions and increased density.

Many horses have radiographic changes without clinical signs, while others show significant pain with minimal radiographic abnormalities. For this reason, your veterinarian should perform a comprehensive exam and rule out other causes of pain and poor performance before making a diagnosis.



Treatment and Management

With proper diagnosis and management, many horses with kissing spines can return to comfortable work. Management involves a multimodal approach tailored to the individual horse. Conservative treatment includes non-steroidal anti-inflammatories, shock wave therapy, chiropractic, acupuncture, corticosteroid injections, and muscle relaxants. Your veterinarian might also

prescribe a controlled exercise program to help strengthen your horse's core muscles and hindquarter strength. Affected horses often require a saddle fit evaluation and adjustment.

Severe cases or horses that don't respond to these therapies might require surgery, such as interspinous ligament desmotomy (cutting the ligament between affected processes) or spinous process resection (removing part of the affected bony processes).



When to Call Your Vet

Contact your veterinarian if you observe:

- Sudden or increased back pain.
- Significant decline in performance or willingness to work.
- New or worsening behavioral issues related to back pain.
- Failure to respond to prescribed treatments.
- Muscle atrophy or asymmetry developing.
- Changes in gait or movement patterns.
- Reluctance to move that wasn't present previously.
- Signs of pain during grooming or saddling that were not present previously.

Regular follow-up appointments with your veterinarian are essential to monitor progress and adjust treatment plans as needed.