



What Is Wobbler Syndrome?

Wobbler syndrome, also known as cervical stenotic myelopathy (CSM), is a neurologic condition that causes compression of the spinal cord in the neck (cervical) region. This compression can damage the nerve pathways that control the horse's coordination and movement.

Wobbler syndrome most commonly affects:

- Young, rapidly growing horses (typically 6 months to 2 years).
- Larger breeds such as Thoroughbreds, Warmbloods, and Draft breeds.
- Males more frequently than females.

Genetics, nutritional factors (particularly high-energy diets promoting rapid growth), and traumatic injuries can contribute to development of the condition.



Clinical Signs

Neurologic signs of wobbler syndrome often begin subtly and progress gradually. These include:

- Incoordination (ataxia), particularly in the hind limbs.
- "Wobbling" or swaying while walking.
- Dragging or scuffing the toes, especially when turning.
- Weakness when backing up.
- Difficulty transitioning between gaits.
- Crossed legs when turning.
- Hypermetria (exaggerated limb movements).
- Muscle atrophy (wasting).

- Tendency to buckle or collapse when pressure is applied to the withers.

Initially, these signs might only be noticeable during specific movements or when the horse is tired. They can be asymmetrical (worse on one side than the other) and either stabilize at a certain point or continue to worsen. Because these signs are similar to those of other neurologic conditions, a professional veterinary diagnosis is essential.



Diagnosis

To diagnose wobbler syndrome, your veterinarian will perform a comprehensive workup that includes a neurologic examination to assess gait, coordination, proprioception (limb placement), and spinal reflexes. Then, he or she will use imaging modalities such as radiographs, computed tomography (CT scan), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), or myelography (a contrast dye study performed under general anesthesia to identify areas of spinal cord compression) to confirm the diagnosis. Your veterinarian might refer you to an equine hospital or specialist for complete diagnostic testing.



Treatment and Management

Treatment options depend on the severity of signs, location, and nature of the compression, age of the horse, and owner considerations. Horses with mild deficits (Grade 1-2) can live comfortable lives with appropriate management, including:

- Restricted exercise to prevent injury.
- Anti-inflammatory medications to reduce swelling.
- Vitamin E supplementation as an antioxidant.
- Dietary management to control growth rate in young horses.
- Physical therapy techniques to improve proprioception.
- A career change or retirement from certain activities.

Ventral fusion surgery to stabilize the affected vertebrae and prevent further compression is a more aggressive approach. Post-surgery, some horses can return to athletic careers over time. If a horse's condition is severe, however, veterinarians often recommend humane euthanasia for equine and human safety reasons.



When to Call Your Vet

If your horse is diagnosed with wobbler syndrome, have your veterinarian perform regular neurologic reassessments to monitor the condition. Contact your vet immediately if you observe:

- New or worsening incoordination.
- Falls or inability to rise.
- Any sudden change in neurologic status.
- Signs of pain in the neck region.
- Development of secondary issues, such as pressure sores,
- Changes in appetite or demeanor.

Honest discussions with your veterinarian about quality-of-life considerations are important throughout the management of this condition.