

# Understanding myofascial release for horses

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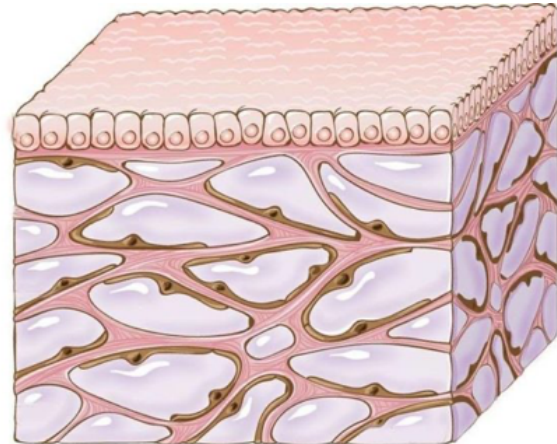
**Myofascial release is gaining traction as an integral part of equine healthcare. Learn about fascia and its role in protecting the inner structures of your horse's body.**

The equine body is composed of many systems, each with its own function. Recently, one of these systems has been receiving great deal of attention, and rightfully so. It's the fascial system – a web-like, continuous structure composed of collagen, elastin and a ground

substance – that surrounds, connects and protects everything within the body. Myofascial release (MFR) is a manual therapy technique that directly targets this system and the problems associated with fascial restriction.

## An introduction to the fascial system

Every nerve, blood vessel, bone, organ, muscle and cell lies within the fascia. This connective tissue simultaneously joins and separates every part of the body, creating a



vital framework that helps support and stabilize your horse, and allows all his bodily systems and structures to work in synergy. If you've ever seen an open wound, you may have seen fascia. It's the thin, smooth, slick tissue covering muscles, tendons and bones.

Each component of fascia has a specific purpose:

- *Collagen fibers* are tough. They provide shape, strength and support.
- *Elastin* allows for stretch and shock absorption.
- *Ground substance* is a viscous fluid that surrounds the cells in the body, creating space for them to get nutrients and oxygen.

## What can go wrong with fascia?

Fascial tissue can become restricted as result of trauma or inflammation. As it restricts, the fascia begins to change. The elastin component is overstretched and loses its resilience. Collagen can

become too dense and fibrous, while the ground substance within the fascial system begins to dehydrate and harden, which places enormous pressure on the surrounding structures. Since fascia is a single system, the pulling caused by restriction begins to affect remote areas of the body, which can lead to numbness or pain from nerves being stretched or compressed; ischemia from decreased blood flow; decreased strength and endurance of the muscle; and an altered structural alignment.

## **What causes fascial restriction?**

Fascial restriction can result from many equine issues. The most common include:

- Trauma (physical or emotional)
- Inflammation
- Overuse
- Repetitive training
- Poor saddle fit
- Mirrored dysfunction of the horse and rider (see below)
- Surgery
- Direct injury
- Stress and strain of athletic activities
- Poor nutrition
- Bad footing

To visualize fascial restriction, imagine a snag in a knitted sweater – the snag pulls throughout the entire garment. If a horse has an injury, the fascia will begin to tighten and pull throughout his whole body, resulting in multiple symptoms. Since everything is surrounded by fascia, these symptoms can be wide-ranging, and often don't follow any specific

pattern. The problem cannot be seen through medical imaging, which makes diagnosis difficult, while compensatory movements make it more difficult still. If your vet is stumped, she might request a myofascial release treatment.

## **What is myofascial release (MFR)?**

Myofascial release is a hands-on, whole body technique. It applies gentle sustained pressure on the myofascial connective tissue to follow and release barriers of restriction. A flow of bioenergy through the body, known as the piezoelectric phenomenon, will allow viscoelastic tissue to elongate with a low load over an extended period of time. It takes 90 to 120 seconds to release into the first barrier of restriction, and a minimum of five minutes for a full release in one area. Only then will the tissue begin to change.

## **Mirrored dysfunction**

Often, a horse and rider influence each other through the imbalances in their bodies. If your seat bones are uneven in the saddle, you're causing your pelvis and spine to tilt. The difference in pressure will ask your horse to bend and lift his back asymmetrically, creating torsion in his body. Over time, his fascia will restrict and lead to training difficulties.

As a rider, you should consider booking your own myofascial release session. Doing so will benefit both you and your horse!

## **How can myofascial release therapy help your horse?**

A horse's structural alignment can be altered by fascial restrictions.

This can lead to difficulties maintaining a gait, a loss of power, or lack of flexibility. Fascial restrictions also commonly create lameness, pain, behavioral changes and fatigue. MFR can help prevent and treat all these issues, while regular treatments can help your horse stay healthier and recover from injury faster.

## **What happens during a typical MFR treatment session?**

To start, a myofascial release practitioner will evaluate the movement of your horse without a rider influencing his body. She will also assess the static position of your horse, checking for structural alignment and palpation. The therapist will then feel for restrictions, which can feel fibrous, immobile, hot, hard or tender. The therapist will generally begin treating in the area of greatest restriction. Sessions may last 60 to 90 minutes.

The horse will show signs of release throughout the treatment by licking, chewing, yawning, and releasing gas, gut sounds or bowel movements. Patches of sweat or hives may appear. Sometimes a horse will experience a healing crisis (a temporary worsening of symptoms) for a few minutes, or even a few days after a treatment. If this occurs, his discomfort can intensify before declining, and he may display some short-term behavioral changes.

Caretakers, veterinarians, farriers, equine dentists, chiropractors, nutritionists and MFR practitioners should all work together as part of your horse's healthcare team in order to maintain his health and well-being.