

# EMA

Equine Massage Academy Ltd

*Therapy Education Research*

## Subtle Signs Your Horse May Be Uncomfortable (That Most Owners Miss)



When we think of discomfort in horses, we often picture obvious signs—lameness, refusal to move, or clear behavioural issues.

But in reality, many horses show much quieter, easily missed signs that something doesn't feel right.

And the tricky part? These signs are often mistaken for *training issues, personality, or even laziness.*

## 1. Shortened Stride

One of the earliest indicators of discomfort.

Your horse may:

- Take shorter strides than usual
- Struggle to lengthen
- Feel restricted rather than forward

This is often linked to physical or mental tension, restriction, or low-level discomfort.

## 2. Stiffness at the Start of Work

A horse that feels stiff for the first 10–20 minutes isn't just "warming up."

This can indicate:

- Muscle tightness
- Joint restriction
- Compensation patterns

A healthy, comfortable horse should loosen quickly within 5 to 10 minutes at the most if allowed to work on a loose rein or in a stretched frame—it should not take longer.

## 3. Reluctance to Go Forward

Often labelled as laziness—but frequently something else.

Ask yourself:

- Does your horse hesitate when asked to move on?
- Do you need constant leg?

Forward should feel *willing*, not forced.

## 4. Difficulty Bending One Way

If your horse:

- Finds one rein harder
- Falls in or out
- Feels uneven

This can indicate asymmetry in the body, often due to discomfort or restriction.

## 5. Behaviour Changes Under Saddle

Sudden or subtle changes like:

- Tail swishing
- Ear pinning

- Resistance in transitions or rushing through them

These are often signs your horse is **trying to communicate discomfort**, not misbehaving!!

## 6. Inconsistent Performance

One day they feel great... the next, not quite right.

This inconsistency is a big clue.

Discomfort often fluctuates depending on:

- Workload
- Surface
- Fatigue
- Temperatures especially if its too cold and joints are arthritic

## 7. Struggling to Engage or “Work Properly”

If your horse:

- Avoids working over the back
- Struggles to engage the hindquarters
- Feels hollow or disconnected – the core is not engaged

It may not be a training issue—it may be that they *can't* comfortably work that way.

### Why These Signs Matter?

These are the signs that often get overlooked—yet they're the ones that appear long before major problems develop.

Catching them early can:

- Prevent injury
- Improve performance
- Transform your horse's way of going

### What You Can Do

Start observing with fresh eyes:

- What feels different—not just what's “wrong”?
- Is there a pattern?
- Has something gradually changed?

Your horse is constantly giving you information—you just need to know how to read it.

## Want to Go Deeper?

Understanding these signs is just the beginning.

Inside our bit size, no work courses, we show you how to:

- Identify subtle discomfort early
- Understand what's causing it
- Take practical steps to improve your horse's comfort and movement

Because when you truly understand your horse's body... everything starts to make sense.

A little investment can save you thousands of £'s in the long run in money, vet bills and downtime!

First choice courses:

- **The Full Extent of Equine Lameness** [LINK](#)
- **Empowering Equestrians with Saddle Assessment Skills** (something every horse owner should know) [LINK](#)
- **Equine Bit and Bridle Fitting for Equestrians** (another essential skill for all horse owners) [LINK](#)

Follow up courses:

- **Equine Massage for Horse Owners** (you learn palpation, massage and more!) [LINK](#)
- **Optimising Gut Health and Colic Prevention** (lots of tell tale signs your horse's gut is the problem) [LINK](#)

## Learn to Listen to Your Horse!

Our courses are approved by:

