

EMA

Equine Massage Academy Ltd

Therapy Education Research

Why Your Horse Feels ‘Stiff’—And What It Really Means



“My horse feels stiff”

It’s something we hear all the time—and often accept as normal.

But here’s the truth:

A horse that feels stiff at the start of a session is telling you something important.

Stiffness isn’t just part of the warm-up.

It’s often the **first sign that something isn’t quite right.**

And sometimes, the cause isn't just in the horse—it can also be influenced by **tack and rider**.

What Is “Stiffness,” Really?

Stiffness isn't simply “tight muscles.”

It can involve:

- Reduced joint mobility
- Muscle tension
- Compensation patterns
- Underlying discomfort
- Sore feet
- Uncomfortable tack (bit, bridle, saddle, girth)
- An unbalanced or insensitive rider

In simple terms, stiffness means your horse is struggling to move freely and comfortably through their body.

Common Causes of Stiffness

1. Muscle Tightness

Just like us, horses develop tight areas—especially if:

- Work is repetitive
- They're compensating for another issue
- They haven't fully recovered between sessions

2. Joint Restriction

If joints aren't moving well, the body compensates.

This often shows as:

- Shortened stride
- Reluctance to bend
- Uneven movement

3. Poor Posture

A horse that moves hollow or inverted will:

- Struggle to lift through the back
- Carry tension

- Feel stiff, especially in transitions

4. Compensation Patterns

If something has been uncomfortable for a while, your horse adapts.

Even if the original issue improves, the movement pattern can remain.

5. Low-Level Discomfort

Not all discomfort is obvious.

Subtle issues can create:

- Protective movement
- Reduced range of motion
- Resistance

6. Tack & Rider Influence

This is often overlooked—but hugely important.

- Poorly fitting tack can create **pressure, restriction, or pain**
- Bits and bridles can affect **jaw, poll, and neck tension** and if not resolved have a chain reaction throughout the body **from head to tail**
- Saddles and girths can restrict **shoulder and front limb movement, core engagement and back lift**
- An unbalanced rider can cause **asymmetry and compensation**

👉 Sometimes the “stiffness” you feel is your horse **trying to cope with external pressure**.

Why “Warming Up” Matters

If your horse consistently feels stiff at the start, it suggests:

👉 They are **not starting from a place of comfort**

A comfortable horse should:

- Move freely early on
- Loosen quickly
- Feel even, willing, and balanced

If they need time to “work through it,” something is likely being **masked—not resolved**.

✅ What You Can Do

Start paying attention to patterns:

- Is stiffness always there—or getting worse?
- Is one side affected more?
- Does it appear in specific movements?
- Does changing the tack make a difference?
- Does the rider influence it?
- Is it there on the lunge or only when being ridden?

Small observations often reveal **bigger underlying issues**.

Start With Simple Checks

- Palpate your horse — is there tension or sensitivity?
- Perform a dynamic assessment?
- What does the horse do when you approach with tack – does it turn away or pin its ears back? If so, there is a problem. Many horses with poorly fitting bits and saddles do this to let you know they aren't happy even before you put the tack on! They aren't stupid at all!
- Is one side different from the other?
- Do they improve—or worsen—during work?

These details matter more than you think. You must learn to observe your horse!

Want to Understand This Properly?

Stiffness is often the **first visible sign** that something isn't right.

Inside our bite-size, no work courses, you'll learn how to:

- Precisely palpate a horse like a professional therapist
- Assess movement in detail
- Identify restrictions early
- Improve comfort, performance, and way of going through correct training

Because when your horse can move freely... everything changes.

A Small Investment, Big Return

Understanding your horse properly can save you thousands in vet bills, lost time, and frustration.

Explore our courses:

- **Equine Massage for Horse Owners** [LINK](#)
- **Training from an Anatomical Perspective** [LINK](#)
- **Conformation, Biomechanics and Beyond** [LINK](#)

- **The Full Extent of Equine Lameness [LINK](#)**

You can truly help your horse to loosen up and ride with freedom!

Our courses are approved by:

