

What are Stress and Trigger Points?

STRESS POINTS:

A stress point is the result of a muscle which has been hyperextended or exposed to heavy, repetitive overtraining or strenuous exertion, resulting in micro-tears in the muscle fibres. These tears sometimes produce micro-spasms and are usually found close to the origin attachment, as this point is less elastic than the insertion point. If a stress point is not inflamed, it is known as 'dormant', while those that are inflamed are commonly called 'active'. If not relieved, active stress points will eventuate in heat and swelling. Sometimes stress points will develop as compensation for another muscle which has been injured, for example, a sore knee may produce active 'compensatory' stress points in the shoulder or muscles of the scapula.

Stress points usually feel like small areas of hardened, rigid tissue, approximately 5-10mm in size. Sometimes they are slightly swollen and may feel tender to the horse when touched. Cold hydrotherapy is initially recommended here as cold restricts blood supply, reduces swelling and inflammation and numbs nerve endings, reducing pain. Stress points may be treated by firstly applying light effleurage to warm up the area, followed by petrissage to soften the site, and finally by direct pressure applied to the point which works the fibres against the bone, increasing blood flow and the development of new fibres. Friction across the fibre can also be used to loosen the muscle fibres and restore individual movement.

TRIGGER POINTS:

Trigger points generally occur as a result of overuse, fatigue or nervous tension, and are identified as the build up of waste products (mainly comprised of lactic acid) within the muscle belly, which act to irritate nerve endings. Trigger points vary in size and can occasionally feel like small, tender nodules which release reasonably quickly under pressure. Hot hydrotherapy is initially recommended for trigger point therapy as heat dilates blood vessels and increases blood flow (facilitating rapid removal of toxins) in addition to relaxing muscle fibres and soothing nerves.

Effleurage, stroking and kneading all act to warm and loosen up the site when commencing trigger point therapy and these techniques may be followed by direct pressure. Once released, trigger point areas should be drained thoroughly with plenty of effleurages.

