

# VET DIARY



## OUR EXPERT

Nicola Thompson is a qualified vet who works for Wright & Moreton in Cheshire, a member practice of XL Equine. She has ridden since she was a child.

## A common problem

Vet Nicola Thompson looks at the treatment options for a horse with kissing spine

Kissing spine is where horses suffer pain because sections of bone (spinous processes) attached to the vertebrae are too close together and 'impinge' on each other. It is a commonly seen condition.

A case I've been involved with is Domino, a 10-year-old sports horse mare who showed subtle signs of a problem – she was reluctant to go forwards, but didn't buck or resent being ridden.

The test for kissing spine is to inject local anaesthetic into the back, between the spinous processes, and see if the horse's movement improves. This is combined with X-rays to see if the gaps are smaller than normal, and if there are changes to the bone that occur with pressure.

Domino's X-rays showed some tight spaces and slight changes to the bones in four sites, and her pain reduced when she was given a local anaesthetic.

Because there can be several factors causing a horse to be uncomfortable, we also carried out a full lameness investigation. Nerve blocks helped us work out that Domino was also experiencing pain in her sacroiliac joint (pelvis).

### Treatment options

Following a diagnosis of kissing spine, we have two options – the first is medical treatment. Anti-inflammatories were injected between the affected spinous processes to relieve pain and inflammation. We medicated the sacroiliac joint, too.

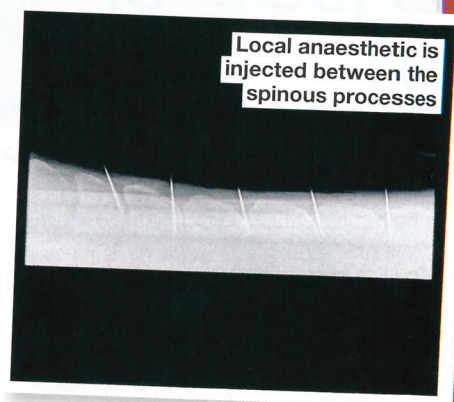
The aim is to allow the horse to work correctly over the back, strengthening core muscles and opening the gaps between the spinous processes.

An exercise programme was designed to help develop Domino's muscles, alongside sports massage and physiotherapy.

Unfortunately, this approach was only effective in the short-term, although it had made Domino more comfortable.

After a discussion with her owners, we decided to opt for surgery, to try and help relieve the pain long-term.

At Wright & Moreton we use a minimally invasive technique which cuts down between the affected spinous processes and releases the intra-spinous ligament.



**“Kissing spine is a significant problem we see regularly but it is very treatable”**

The ligament is the site of a lot of the pain associated with kissing spine – releasing it can cause a big improvement.

The surgery is done with the horse sedated and standing, which carries less of a risk than general anaesthetic.

Very small incisions of roughly 4cm long are made over each site. Once healed, there is little to no scarring in most cases.

### Rehabilitation and recovery

Post-surgery, Domino underwent a careful rehabilitation programme of non-ridden



exercise, with the aim of building her core strength and opening the spinous process spaces permanently.

She had more physio and was lunged in a Pessoa training aid to build strength before she was ridden again.

The good news is she has returned to eventing and is a real success story.

So, a kissing spine diagnosis is not the end of the world and the majority of horses return to full work. Medication and surgery are good treatment options and positive results can be achieved.

Even going down the surgical route isn't as scary as a lot of owners believe.

It does take some effort from an owner, to carry out the exercise plan, but the results are worth it.

If you have any concerns that your horse has back pain, talk to your vet because there is often lots they can do to help. ■

**NEXT ISSUE** Nicola discusses common winter hoofcare issues, including thrush and abscesses.