Outline of Video Lesson on the Wither (and Back) Rock and Lift
from The Horse Lover's Guide to Massage: What Your Horse Wants You to Know
and from AllAboutAnimalMassage.com

What will the wither rock and lift do for my horse (and me)?

Benefits....

A useful (and easy) assessment tool
- identify pain responses
- identify restrictions
- monitor range of motion in the back
- monitor quality of movement in the back

Therapeutic effects for your horse
- reduce pain
- reduce restrictions
- improve flow and coordination of movements
- improve joint and muscle comfort
- reduce concussion with each footfall, which reduces risk of injuries (legs and body)

Additional benefits for you
- better athletic performance from your partner (with better use of the back)
- better shock absorption for easier sitting (less jarring and concussion for you, too)
  (though movement may also become “bigger” to sit as it improves quality)
- earlier detection of problems = better odds of faster and less costly solutions
- a happier and more comfortable partner

What is it doing? How does it work?
Anatomy: spinous processes of the vertebrae create long levers into the joints, so just small movements at the ends create bigger movements and stretches at each joint.
Therefore you want to be considerate with your pressures and speeds, and pay close attention to your horse's reactions. This is a powerful technique and it is possible to overdo it.

- Joint fluid is stimulated between vertebrae (for the back and also the base of the neck)
- Joint fluid is also stimulated at the rib heads (where they attach at spine)
- Back, rib, neck, and shoulder muscles, tendons and ligaments are being stimulated and stretched
- Even hindquarter muscles are stimulated and coordinated in response to shifting weight
- Circulation is stimulated, increasing the rate at which waste products can be removed and nutrients and oxygen can be delivered to all the soft tissues

Outline of video lesson from All About Animal Massage: Wither (and Back) Rock and Lift
• As the joints of the vertebrae and the ribs are loosened, your horse's ability to bend and to lift the back and withers in improved. (Not to mention the ability to breathe more efficiently!)

• Since movement through the back is an essential part of absorbing shock with each stride (or jump), landing becomes less jarring, less concussive, and therefore less prone to cause repetitive stress injuries.

• As chronic muscle tensions and restrictions along the spine decrease, pressure on nerves is relieved, improving comfort and nerve communications signals to the whole body

This section of the back (withers to loin) does not have a large range of motion at any of the joints, but the difference between a very small movement and no movement can be very significant for the function of the entire back, including joints, muscles, ribs, and nerves.

Your horse's withers is an area of many important transitions: from the neck to the back, from the forelimb to the body, and at times (just behind the withers), from the rider (and saddle) to the horse. This makes the whole area a major “crossroads” of many lines of movement and force. As you can imagine, transition areas are generally more prone to stress and strain, and therefore deserving of extra support whenever possible.

“How to” steps, plus tips for being most effective

Step 1: Warm up the muscles

Step 2: Rock gently and slowly side to side
  Generally the slower the better. Your horse will give you feedback on how it feels.
  Start with very small movements and gradually increase (if it's comfortable for your horse).

Step 3: Ask for the withers to lift, then the belly
(Note: It is possible for a horse to kick his or her own belly in this girth area, so your hands are at some risk here. You must watch your horse's feedback very closely, and with some skill, to avoid being kicked. Even if your horse doesn't generally kick when being groomed or tacked up, there could be a different response now that you're trying something different. If you're not sure about the safety issue, please get some assistance to keep yourself safe.)

  Start on the mid-line in the girth area. There's a hollow spot (slight depression) here at the end of the sternum, which is often a good place to start, or anywhere in the girth area if you're not sure. Look up at your horse's withers to watch for them to rise as you press and scratch/rub a little underneath. Add more pressure gradually as needed, and you can also move fingers around to different spots along the belly to see where you get the best responses.

  If you can't get the lift, rather than resorting to a hoof pick or something else more severe than your fingers (and maybe some fingernail), I suggest rather doing some form of bodywork to ease the restrictions and then retry the lift. One thing you can do, for example, is repeat the side-to-side rocking movements. That will make the lifts easier for your horse with repetitions, though there may also be need for more bodywork or chiropractic care to achieve the best results.

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What am I watching for? What if my horse has trouble?

Primarily as an assessment tool...
   Apply the same technique, but for a briefer time
   Main purpose is to gather information

As continual assessment whenever applying more slowly for therapeutic benefits...

In either case, observe your horse for....

   Reactions: Positive or negative fascial expressions and body language?
   Muscle responses: Visible spasms in back muscles? Flinching or dipping in back?
   Range of motion (ROM): Visible lift? Bends to left and right equally?
   Quality of movement: Smooth or jerky? How much pressure needed to trigger?

   Consider interpretations (possible meanings), without jumping to conclusions...
   Does there seem to be pain present, or not?
   Is the movement restricted, or not? (If so, where? Which direction?)
   Is it involving soft tissue, joint issues, or both? (Can be hard to know, but consider.)
   Could there be weakness involved?
   Does it seem like there may be confusion or fear involved?
   How sure are you of saddle fit? (Even “custom made” saddles are not a guarantee.)

For more information, I do offer on-line classes, including Back Care Basics for Horses and Equine Back Pain. Both include variations on these Wither Rock and Lift techniques, as well as many other tools you can use to help your horse's back. Back Care Basics is made from excerpts of Equine Back Pain. If you start with that, you can “upgrade” to the longer class if you want more, or stick with the basics. Or, of course, you can start right in with the full Equine Back Pain. Both classes have a 30-day money-back guarantee, so you can try out either one with no risk.

What you'll learn will not only help improve function and comfort if there is a problem, but you can also often avoid pains and restrictions from developing, and detect problems earlier, so these classes are intended for all horse lovers, not only the one's whose horses are having back problems already!

Thank you,

Megan Ayrault, LMP, L/SAMP

P.S. I forgot to mention, you can repeat the cycle of rocking and lifts 2-3 times (or more if your horse is responding well), without overdoing it, as long as the pressures and speeds are gentle. I usually start with the rocking. Ending with the lift, which is stretching both sides of the back at the same time, is also a nice “anti-gravity” effect to leave your horse feeling “open” at the end. I love to do this technique for my horses after riding especially. You can also use it before to help them warm up.

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