

Gudrun uses her fingers to identify areas of tension

OUR EXPERT
Gudrun Wallis



A qualified vet and McTimoney Animal Practitioner, Gudrun has set up her own business, Back Therapy Horse Vet. She is also a keen event rider. Visit: backtherapyhorsevet.co.uk.

How McTimoney could benefit your horse:-

- As part of a health check after winter or following a break from work or competition;
- To reduce the chance of injury in competition;
- By addressing the cause of a drop in performance, or signs of stiffness when being worked;
- Looking for areas of discomfort that could be causing behaviour issues;
- After the horse has suffered a slip or fall, during a competition or out in the field.

In perfect balance

Whether you want to fine tune your horse so he performs at his best in a competition environment, or there is an underlying health or behaviour issue you want to address, the McTimoney technique could help

Alternative therapies have gained in popularity over recent years and many vet practices now advocate certain methods and will recommend them to owners as part of a horse's treatment plan.

Indeed, some vets are so impressed with the benefits achieved by certain therapies they choose to specialise in them.

Gudrun Wallis uses the McTimoney technique on animals to identify and treat causes of back pain, resolve poor performance and address behavioural problems.

The technique can help horses that are suffering from back, neck, pelvic and musculoskeletal problems.

These issues can have a negative impact on a horse's performance and cause discomfort – and possibly pain – which can also result in behavioural issues occurring.

Berkshire-based vet Gudrun has set up her own company this spring, specialising in back-related issues.

"McTimoney treatment uses chiropractic techniques which focus on the skeletal frame of a horse or other animal, to ensure everything is balanced and symmetrical," says Gudrun.

"If a horse is not balanced, he is going to find it hard to move in a true straight line, bend evenly in both directions and work effectively from behind.

"Through balancing the skeleton you are also promoting optimum function of the nervous system, as misaligned vertebrae can interfere with nerves exiting from the spinal cord."

McTimoney treatment involves using quick and light hand movements, termed adjustments, to correct misalignments in bone and tension in muscles.

"It is a gentle form of treatment, so most horses readily accept it," says Gudrun, who explains that the technique encourages the body to regain optimum function and mobility.

The movements she performs stimulate the muscles and bone to return to correct alignment and balance.



Caroline says her horse Billy has benefitted from McTimoney treatments

Words: Jo Browne; photography: David Miller

"My interest in McTimoney grew because there is a lot of research behind it, which proves the benefits," she adds.

"I have also seen horses with behavioural or poor performance issues that were unresponsive to painkillers and conventional veterinary treatment, but showed great improvements after manipulation.

"Often, owners don't realise their horse has suffered a trauma that can cause misalignments – he could have slipped or tripped in the field unseen, and even energetic bucking can sometimes cause problems.

"Other, chronic reasons for misalignments include poor conformation, sharp teeth and ill-fitting tack."

To demonstrate the method, which was developed in the 1950s by John McTimoney, and what an assessment and treatment entails, Gudrun enlisted the help of eventer Billy.

Owned by Caroline Hutton, the 15-year-old gelding has been seen by Gudrun previously, due to issues caused by an ill-fitting saddle.

Billy's new saddle has not yet arrived, but a pad has been used underneath the old one as an interim measure.

Assessing the horse

Gudrun gets hands-on with Billy and assesses his muscles, to get an overall picture of the horse and ensure there are no underlying veterinary issues.

"I need to be confident he doesn't have a tendon injury, for example," she states.

She last saw Billy in January, when he was tight in the lumbar region – the area behind the saddle that correlates with the lower back in humans.

"It is a common area to find tension in a horse," says Gudrun. "The muscles here have to work hard and when you have a saddle that is not ideally balanced, it loads even more weight on to the region.

"While a lot of horses have tension in that area, it doesn't necessarily mean they are experiencing pain, however."

Next, Gudrun focuses on the longissimus dorsi muscle, which runs along the length of the back.

Who can treat your horse?

Before booking a practitioner to work with your horse, you will need veterinary permission. To find a McTimoney Animal Practitioner who is qualified to work on horses, visit: www.mctimoney-animal.org.uk.

Ensure your therapist has appropriate insurance in place. All practitioners registered with the MAA (McTimoney Animal Association) are fully insured.

Animal practitioners cannot call themselves chiropractors, which is a term that applies to those qualified and registered to treat humans.

She applies pressure with her fingers on 'muscle trigger points' to see if there is any reaction – in some areas on Billy's back, the muscle flutters.

"When I press here there is a flickering of the muscle, like an electric current under the skin, and it shows something is not right," she says.

"Again, it's common for horses to exhibit tension there – it's like humans getting lower back pain when they do a lot of mucking out.

"The reaction is on his left side, and occurred last time I saw Billy, although it has improved quite a bit since then. The rest of his muscles are soft, which is good."

“The vertebrae should run in a nice straight line, down the length of the neck and along the back”



Muscle tension can pull the vertebrae out of line

Gudrun notes that Billy's pelvis is slightly lower on the left hand side and his tail is sitting to the right.

"This hints he is not totally balanced in some areas," she says. "I now need to check he is sound before continuing with the treatment – if he isn't, it becomes a veterinary issue." Billy trots up sound and Gudrun is happy.

Making adjustments

After identifying areas of his musculature that need attention, Gudrun focuses on Billy's skeleton.

She begins behind the head, at the first vertebrae in the neck (the atlas), another common problem area, then moves on to the pelvis to correct any misalignments.

"The vertebrae should run in a nice straight line, down the length of the neck and along the back," she says.

"However, muscle tension can pull the vertebrae out of line."

When this happens, it causes stress on the surrounding soft tissues, muscles and tendons, which can result in discomfort and muscle spasm.

Gudrun explains: "The horse may feel a tickling sensation, or pins and needles due to the impact of misalignments on the nervous system."

To make an adjustment, she performs a quick and light movement with her hands.

She says this high velocity, low amplitude action "stimulates the horse's body to rebalance itself".

"I am transferring momentum onto the bone that's not balanced," she explains. "It's like

tapping a tuning fork – it creates a recoil in the muscle attachments of the bone. The muscles contract left-right-left-right and release tension so the bone returns to the correct position.

"I often get a lick and chew or yawning response from a horse when I release muscle spasm."

A symmetrical pelvis

The vet's attention then turns to the pelvis, ensuring Billy is standing perfectly square.

"As I noted earlier, Billy's pelvis is down on the left-hand side," Gudrun says.

"With the pelvis, there are two things that can occur: it can rotate, where effectively one leg becomes slightly shorter than the other, and it can tilt, causing one limb to track up more than the other. His muscles are also tight in this area."



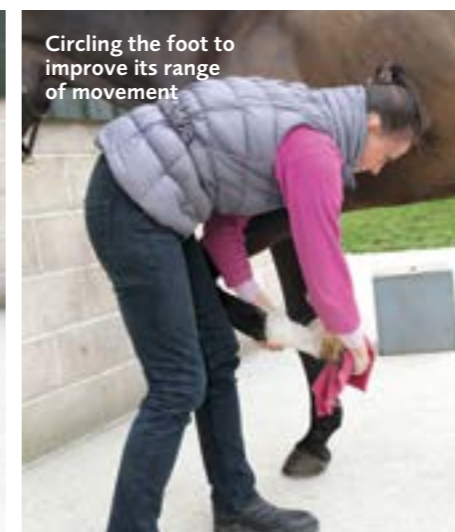
Tension in the neck is common



Gudrun finds Billy is lower on the left side of his pelvis



Gudrun lifts Billy's hindleg to level his pelvis



Circling the foot to improve its range of movement



Stimulating the midline encourages the horse to work his core muscles

“To address Billy's issues, Gudrun lifts the hindleg on the side the pelvis is lower and pulls it up and forward”

Gudrun does point out that no horse is 100 per cent symmetrical: "If you went to a human chiropractor, they would find something, and it's the same with horses. Humans are right or left-handed and a lot of horses favour one side."

To address Billy's issues, Gudrun lifts the hindleg on the side the pelvis is lower and pulls it up and forward.

"I am firing the muscles up to correct the skeleton, by putting the leg through a full range of upward motion," she says.

After checking the results, she notes there is still a slight pelvic tilt. She lifts the leg up again: "Three, two, one, drop," she calls.

"There, that's so much better. The pelvis is symmetrical and the muscles nice and supple."

"I will use both chiropractic and physiotherapy techniques on Billy to resolve the tightness in that area."

She adds that she always addresses the front and rear of the horse first, as sometimes this will release some of the muscle tension in between.

Releasing tension

To check for any further misalignments, Gudrun returns to the neck and works her way along the length of the horse.

She notes Billy has three vertebrae out of alignment.

"It does tally up with the checks I made earlier as he is tense in the areas where the misalignments are."

Gudrun links her hands and performs a quick pushing movement on the misaligned vertebrae (see main image, page 88).

She then treats the areas of soft tissue that are tight and 'knotted' by pushing her palm into his side, and then uses the sides of her hands to tap quickly along the back and to the top of the hindquarters.

"This tapping technique increases the blood flow to soft tissue so it can heal itself and remove any toxins," she states.

Running her hands over Billy's back, she finds the areas of tension and holds them for up to 30 seconds.

"You wait until the tissue gives and your fingers sink in," she says. "Now, we have lots of nice and squishy soft tissue, which is much better."

Finally, Gudrun addresses Billy's feet. She lifts each one and circles it gently.

"There isn't a great range of movement, but the circling motion should improve this."

Treatment after-care

Now Billy's treatment is complete, Gudrun recommends that the horse has a day off work.

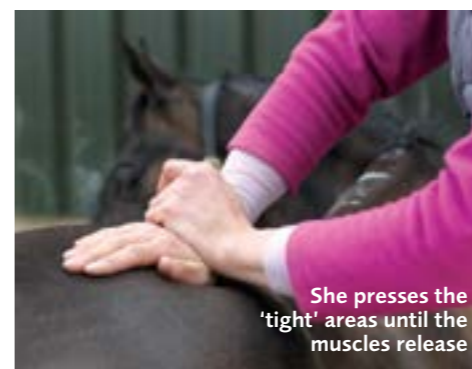
"If you don't give him a rest, his muscle memory will take over and the healing will not occur," she states.

"After his rest day, he can go for a 20-minute walk, in a straight line and on a loose rein."

Useful stretches

Gudrun will often suggest stretches that owners can perform on their horse at home.

"Most people know about carrot stretches, and these can be useful to keep a horse supple," she says. "However, in Billy's case he's bending OK so there's little point in doing them."



She presses the 'tight' areas until the muscles release

Instead, she suggests Billy's owner Caroline performs an exercise to stretch out the muscles in his hindleg.

"Lift the leg but keep it close to the ground, then stretch it forward," Gudrun says.

"This stretches out the gluteals (croup muscles) and lumbar region.

"Hold for a little while and you should carefully be able to stretch the leg out even more."

She also recommends an exercise which she refers to as "sit ups for horses".

"Encourage the horse to lift his back and work his abdominal muscles by stimulating the midline under his belly with your fingers," she says.

"You will need to push your finger tip in to get the correct reaction. Doing this regularly will help improve core strength which helps to support the rider's weight on the horse's back." ■

The owner's view

Billy's owner, Caroline Hutton, said she noticed there was a problem when Billy became unsettled when he was being tacked up.

"He would stamp his feet and dip his back," she says. "It would also happen when grooming him, and I felt he wasn't working well on the flat."

"I've owned him since July last year and we compete at BE90-level eventing, although he has previously evented at two-star level."

"We identified there was a problem with his saddle and Gudrun said it had been affecting the muscles in his back."

"Since his McTimoney treatment he has been much better. I can run my hands over his back and brush him without getting a reaction, and his flatwork has improved."