

Keeping Abreast

BREAST ISSUES IN HORSE SPORTS



Lucy McDonald with her young Appaloosa Ironhorse Tennessee.

Lucy McDonald won't ride faster than a walk unless she's in a sports bra. Even with support Lucy suffers back and upper shoulder pain after riding due to her chest size.

Breast-related riding pain is a taboo topic because it's deeply private and personal. But women who suffer aren't alone. Researchers at the UK's University of Portsmouth investigated breast-related pain in horse riders. In 2016 they found 40 per cent of female riders were affected and this was significantly related to cup size.

Following an afternoon ride at her home in the Southern Highlands of NSW, Lucy can have back pain until she sleeps, sometimes still waking up stiff and sore the following day. For the 22-year-old, the pain comes from the weight of her chest and straps of her bra, exacerbated by vertical strain — or bounce — during a horse's paces.

"In the rising trot, nothing is still, especially if I'm not wearing the right bra," says Lucy. She also experiences tightness in her muscles, particularly in her shoulders. These ongoing issues have affected how often Lucy rides.

"I strive to ride every day as much as I can but that becomes rinse and repeat with the pain almost constant," she says.

Lucy feels her position and self-confidence are affected too. "It's almost a counterweight and impacts how I sit in the saddle," she says. "I also find myself dressing in a way that covers everything — like a baggier shirt — so that if things do bounce you're not going to see it as much."



Lucy McDonald riding her Quarter Horse Spin N Roan.

"In the rising trot, nothing is still, especially if I'm not wearing the right bra."

A quality sports bra has given Lucy some relief. "I've found that spending a bit more money on a quality sports bra and making sure it fits well can minimise the bounce a lot," she says. "For bigger breasted women it's hard to get the right fit."

Another earlier study into the effect of sports bras by Portsmouth university backs Lucy's experience. A normal bra can reduce breast bounce by up to 38 per cent while a sports bra can reduce bounce by up to 78 per cent.

Dr Yezdi Mistry, a specialist plastic and cosmetic surgeon from Newcastle in NSW, says the main support for the breast is the skin envelope and connective tissue i.e. coopers ligaments. With large breasted women these structures are stretched and lose elasticity leading to more droopy breasts. A woman with a 16D cup size is carrying around 1.2kg of weight at the front of her chest. This weight tips the person forward and the postural muscles have to work harder to bring the shoulders back and neck up. This places tension on

the back, neck and shoulders and is why many women - even before horse riding - already experience discomfort.

"Studies show that breasts can move up to 10 centimetres up and down during high impact sport and that causes a lot of stress and loading on those muscles," Dr Mistry says. "The idea of trying to minimise that discomfort is trying to keep the breast in unison with the torso; you want everything to move in one complex." A well-fitted sports bra can help reduce ptosis, or droop of the breast, and also alleviate neck, back and shoulder pain.

The elasticity of sports bra material is vital to function, so a quality bra is of little use if it's past its use-by date. The general advice is to replace your sports bra on a regular basis. The fit of the bra should be assessed closely and shoulder straps should be wide to prevent notching or digging in. If a high level of breast support is needed, both Dr Mistry and Sports Medicine Australia recommend a supportive sports bra, or even two bras

(a sports bra and crop top), to achieve enough support.

For riders experiencing pain, Dr Mistry says a breast reduction can, in a large number of cases, improve quality of life. Headaches, neck, shoulder and back pain are indications breast reduction surgery could be considered, along with rashes under the breast from sweating and chafing. Clothes not fitting well, social awkwardness or embarrassment are other indications for the procedure.

"As plastic surgeons we are ideally trying to improve both the functionality of the breast for the patient, reduce their symptoms and also aesthetically still achieve the feminine form of the breast," Dr Mistry says. "It's one of those winning surgeries where people generally get a good outcome and the main thing that they say to you afterwards is, 'I wish I'd done that years ago'."

Breast reductions are generally day surgery or a one night-stay procedure. Patients are usually wearing a surgical support bra for six to eight weeks and can be back doing office-type work in ten days to a fortnight. A return to high-level physical activity can occur between six

A well-fitted, correctly sized sports bra that's made for high impact activities will improve comfort in the saddle.
Photo: Tooykrub/Shutterstock.



"Comfort affects how you look and how you ride."

to eight weeks post-operation, steadily increasing from there. And, in answer to the all-important question — how long would you be out of the saddle? — Dr Mistry says at around eight weeks patients can recommence riding, but only if wearing the appropriate support.

Dr Rob Kuru, a NSW spinal surgeon, says there are other options to address back pain in women who are happy with their breast size and don't want surgery. Flexibility-based training can improve the core and back's muscular endurance, which reduces muscle fatigue and alleviates pain. Suggested programs include pilates, yoga, circuit training and low-rate, high-repetition weight training. "Scientifically, flexibility-based training is shown to be better than anything else in managing all spinal pain," Dr Kuru says. "Generally, there's a 6.5-7/10 chance of improving pain."

Pain can be self-limiting and Dr Kuru says if you're enjoying riding with only niggles or aches, you are perfectly safe to continue. "People will find or adopt postures where it hurts less," he says. "They'll self-select those to facilitate their enjoyment."

For Western Australian Danielle Perkins, both posture and pain from her breasts were influential in her decision to swap disciplines so she could still enjoy riding. Danielle grew up eventing and showing before reaching high school and realising the disciplines no longer suited her comfort. Showing and the dressage phase of eventing required a tall body stature and Danielle said she'd struggle with the pain of holding her position.



Danielle Perkins riding Yalveda Elwood HSH.

"My breasts really started to take a toll on me," she says. Danielle admits when she was young she didn't select the best bra for sport which led inevitably to pain. Even when she found a suitable sports bra the pain then moved to her mid- to lower-back.

Danielle has embraced the change in discipline and found joy playing polocrosse and trail riding. Since both activities have less emphasis on posture or consistent pace, she's able to prioritise comfort.

"I still don't like trotting, especially trotting circles, because it makes me feel uncomfortable and I feel that goes through to the horse," she says. "Comfort affects how you look and how you ride."

Lucy says "small breasts seem to be a luxury I've never experienced" and, while larger breasts seem to raise challenges, there are solutions. Every person deserves to feel comfortable enough to embrace their passion. 🍀



For further reading, scan the QR code to view Sports Medicine Australia's guide for exercise and breast support.



Article: Rachel Clayfield.