



## HEALTHY BACK RESOURCE

*The Rider's Pain-Free Back: Overcome Soreness, Injury and Aging and Stay in the Saddle for Years to Come*  
By James Warson, MD, with Ami Hendrickson  
Published by Trafalgar Square  
Available at [HorseBooksEtc.com](http://HorseBooksEtc.com)  
Hardcover, 170 pages; \$29.95

If you've had back pain, and tried to explain to your doctor why you can't stop riding, you may have been regarded skeptically. But when riders with back pain showed up at James Warson's Fort Collins, Colorado, practice, he knew just what they were saying, and why they didn't want to stop riding.

A neurosurgeon and horseman, Warson tried to find ways to get riders back in the saddle—with a healthy back. But he found very little knowledge among colleagues when it came to equestrian-specific treatments.

With a rider's eye—and a rider's understanding of how your back moves while you're riding—he began to analyze the anatomy and physics of riding. He attended shows and events, spent time in the saddle, and studied how posture, riding style, and the type of horse could impact a rider's spinal health.

Then he began working with patients to regain—and retain—back health based on his observations and medical knowledge. This book gathers his observations, treatment, and understanding of how riders use their spines, in an effort to keep those with back problems able to ride as much as possible.

He starts with basic information about the spine, illustrated with diagrams and photos, then covers the different types of problems riders can have. Throughout the book he's included case studies that riders can relate to. Then he explains the physics of riding—combining the motion of the rider, with the horse's movement—to explain how riding affects the spine.

He also addresses the importance of saddle fit and the use of saddle pads, and points out something that might seem counter-intuitive: a preference for thin saddle pads versus thick pads.

"Prolonged riding using thick saddle pads leads to stiffness, soreness, tension, and muscular strain in both the horse and the rider," Warson says.

From there, he delves into the specifics of how various disciplines affect the spine, and the most common types of back injuries seen in those disciplines.

The second part of the book is devoted to achieving, improving, and maintaining back health, and offers specific stretching and strengthening exercises (see excerpted "Spider Crawl," at right, for a good lateral stretch), then covers traditional and alternative treatments and pain management.

In his final chapter, Warson gives tips for preventing injuries

around the barn—from barn chores and saddling to stirrup-position and fear-related body use.

He points out that many riders with back pain may need to make a stirrup adjustment. "In their desire to maintain, perhaps, a more vertical riding position, they tend to overdo it and move the stirrups too far back.

"These equestrians almost always have poor abdominal strength," he adds. "A combination of moving the stirrups a bit forward and strengthening the abdominal muscles allows them to have a more anatomically sustainable position when riding."

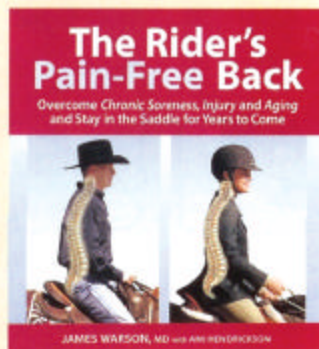
Warson moves on to address how changing riding styles, disciplines, or breeds can help keep you in the saddle longer.

"If a rider has an injury, or complains of chronic pain, he needs to ride a horse whose natural movements, rhythm, and activity complement, rather than contradict, his own," Warson says.

He suggests that a rider with a long torso may not be suited to a horse with a rapid gait. "A rider with a relatively short torso may be able to ride (the horse) comfortably, while the same animal may cause a rider with a longer torso to experience more of a whip-like motion that produces pain."

What if you're a very tall rider? Warson suggests a horse with a sweeping, horizontal gait.

If you have chronic or acute back pain and are trying to return to the saddle, Warson offers information that'll keep riding a part of your life for a long time. —Debbie Moors



**Spider Crawl** (Excerpted from *The Rider's Pain-Free Back*.) This exercise is especially recommended for riders who participate in team penning, cutting, or reining, persons with scoliosis, or for anyone who wishes to improve his or her lateral flexibility. Remember to keep your shoulders relaxed and breathe deeply.

1. Stand vertically, with your feet together. Let your hands and arms hang loosely at your sides.
2. Bend laterally (sideways) to the right, very slowly. (Don't twist your shoulders or your back.) Slowly "walk" the fingers of your right hand down the lateral or outside portion of your right leg. Stretch to the right as far as possible.
3. Slowly stand up straight again.
4. Bend laterally to the left, very slowly. Slowly walk the fingers of your left hand down the lateral (outside portion) of your left leg. Stretch to the left as far as possible.
5. Repeat four or five times on each side.

(Editor's note: This stretch is done from side to side. Picture yourself sandwiched between two panes of glass, so the stretch is felt along the side of the body.)