

What is A Neck Bend? And What To Do About It.

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Well positioned neck on a turn. Photo Credit: NBanaszak Photography

Have you seen a horse doing the neck bend? Maybe you do it unintentionally, thinking that it “feels right”.

On a turn, you “bend” the horse, and the horse’s neck comes far to the inside. The body continues on the same original arc, but you’ve got that head and neck pointing in the direction you want to go!

Sometimes, the horse's body actually drifts out even though the neck is pointing in. Other times, the horse takes a tight turn to the inside, almost stumbling over his front legs because of the sudden movement.

Neck Bend

The neck bend looks exactly as it sounds. The rider goes to bend the horse, and instead of achieving a tail-to-head arc through the body, only the neck juts to the inside. It looks almost like the neck comes off the body and does its own thing, regardless of what the rest of the horse is doing.

It might be caused by the rider who is pulling the neck in with the inside rein, or it might be caused by the overly one-sided horse who prefers to carry his neck to one side of the body. If you feel carefully, you might notice the outside rein getting longer and the inside hand pulling farther back.

The neck bend causes the horse to be imbalanced. No matter which movement he performs, his neck is essentially taken out of the equation and the horse moves out of straightness.

Crookedness can cause many problems over the long-term, from misbehavior to soundness concerns.

Needless to say, all horses and riders have a stiffer and a more supple side. We work diligently on developing both sides equally in effort to become truly ambidextrous in the long run.

True Bend

True bend happens through the whole body. The hind end has a slight inclination to the inside, the rib cage is actually lifted off the inside leg, and the whole front end - from withers forward, not just the neck - is correspondingly pointed to the inside. Some people describe a good bend as a "banana curve", which gives us a good image to keep in mind (although no horse can really bend to that degree).

"Bend" is one of those constantly challenging basics of riding, no matter what level you ride at and the experience of your horse. Bend allows the horse to move in balance around turns. Proper body positioning encourages adequate weight-bearing of the inside hind leg, freedom of movement and swinging through the back. A lateral bend encourages (and allows) longitudinal flexion - the lifting of the back that results in "rounding" and better weight carriage of both the horse and the rider.

From Neck Bend to True Bend

1. Straighten the neck.

I know this sounds counter-intuitive. You want to bend so the neck should be bent, right? Well, not exactly. Make sure that the neck comes out of the shoulders naturally. Use your outside rein to support the neck. If the horse wants to take his neck to the inside, use a resisting (not pulling backward) neck rein aid to prevent him from pulling in.

In contrast, if you find yourself pulling his neck in with your inside rein, stop! Even out your reins and start working on a nice neck rein to do the talking.

2. Point your body into the turn.

Starting at your seat, position yourself so that your whole body is looking just about a quarter of a circle ahead on your circle. Your torso should be on top of your seat (not collapsing/leaning in or

out). Your shoulders will be also pointing in the direction of the turn - not too much but also not too little. Your head should look natural - about 1/4 of a turn ahead - don't crank your own neck to the middle of the circle!

3. Use your inside seat and leg.

Start the horse's body bend with your weight on the inside seat bone and your inside leg at the girth. You can pulse your inside leg in rhythm with the horse's strides rather than keeping one even pressure through several strides. If necessary, you can let the horse drift out a bit until he understands that you want him to take more weight on the inside hind leg. This should help him move his rib cage slightly away from your inside leg.

4. Use your outside leg.

The outside leg asks the horse's hip to come to the inside. Position this leg behind the girth. This leg also prevents the horse's hips from drifting out too far.

5. Use the inside/outside reins.

The inside rein is responsible *only* for the horse's flexion through the jaw. Use a direct rein pressure on the inside rein until you see just the corner of the inside eye and no more. The outside rein is the neck rein. It should indicate the direction of the turn and act as the barrier that prevents the horse from stepping out too far.

Start with a mild bend and work toward a deeper bend over time.

Developing a true bend on a 20-meter circle is hard enough for a stiff horse and rider. So start there, and work on achieving and then maintaining the bend over the whole circle. As you both get stronger and more evenly supple, make the circle smaller in increments. 15-meter and 10-meter circles require progressively deeper bends. In all cases, make sure it's not just your horse's neck that is coming in but that there is a nice arc through the whole body.

It takes years for both the horse and rider to become truly supple on both sides. Every time you add a new movement, you will likely need to revisit the bend within that movement. But don't despair - just keep working on it at all times and be aware of that dreaded neck bend!

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