

The Benefits of Stretching

One of the ways to maintain muscular health and therefore prevent strain injuries is by stretching. Human athletes have long understood the benefits of stretching, especially related to improving athletic ability and performance. Likewise, applied regularly, stretching for horses can enhance physical fitness and the ability to learn and perform skilled movements; increase the range of motion, suppleness and circulation; reduce the risk of injury to joints, muscles, and tendons; increase mental and physical relaxation; enhance development of body awareness, co-ordination and reduce muscular soreness and tension. Stretching can be used for pain relief, rehabilitation, injury prevention and improving efficiency of movement. A slow stretch can elongate the muscle it becomes “used” to the new length as the stretch is held. Slow stretching also increases the metabolism in the muscle elevating its oxygen consumption allowing it to relax causing small trigger points or knots to reduce.

Supple muscles can be the difference between a hollowed out alignment and a confident horse traveling in the correct frame. Stretching creates more flexibility in the back and neck allowing the horse to more effectively use their body. In addition supple muscles in the forelimbs and hamstring area minimise the risk on injury and makes your horse more gymnastic.

How to Stretch your Horse

Stretching can be done on the ground (passive stretching) and in the saddle (active stretching). Including passive stretching in your horses cool down routine is a fantastic way to keep your horse supple and maintain their muscular health. **It is absolutely vital that your horse is warm before you attempt to stretch it.**

To increase flexibility in the muscles holding the stretch for a period of time is important, usually 5 - 15 seconds is usually sufficient.

Ridden exercises that assist in stretching your horse can be included as part of your normal training routine. The following Active Stretches have been taken from Karin Blignault’s highly recommended book [Stretch Exercises for your Horse](#). Cross training is by far the most effective way of keeping your horse healthy in both body and mind. For example, it is important to balance circle work, with flat straight work, you might jumping or dressage work one day and a ride out the next. Knowing when to stop is the key to preventing injury. Push too hard and you will cause an injury. A human athlete can feel the strain and stop but a horse can be pushed beyond its ability to cope. As with all exercises, vary your routine and do not do these exercises to the exclusion of all others, they are intended as an additional workout for your horse.



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2. Ride low and round in trot and canter. Ride transitions walk-trot-canter and canter-trot-walk maintaining this frame. **This should not be done for long periods of time. Let the horse dictate how long is appropriate to avoid over tiring their muscles. Over tired muscles can tear.**
3. Walk and trot over 6-8 poles and small caveletti, encouraging the horse to stretch his head and neck down. The first and last poles should be placed at slightly shorter distances than the rest. As a variation increase the height of the poles slowly to stretch the triceps muscles. You can also slowly increase the distance between the poles to provide an additional stretch.
4. Perform rein-back exercises starting with a few steps and slowly building up to 6-8 steps. **Do not repeat this exercise too many times as it may cause muscle strain.**
5. Working in all gaits up and down hills has a good suppling effect in the loins. Canter uphill gives the most stretching. Be careful once again not to overdo this exercise.
6. Ride serpentines at the trot with strong half halts before the change of bend and a deep change of bend with backtracking in between the loops to emphasise the stretch. Try to put as many loops as you can in the serpentine.
7. Ride in spirals. Start with a 20m circle then gradually reduce to 6m then push horse out again to 20m.
8. Ride half passes, shoulder in, shoulder out and also counter canter. Any leg yielding exercises are useful. Try these in as many gaits as you can.
9. When riding out, ride in a lengthened frame for part of the ride.

Be aware

- Your horse must be warm
- Stretch and release muscles slowly
- Never drop the horse's limb, place it back in position
- Check your own body position (do not cause yourself an injury)
- Stretching should be specific to the individual needs of the horse, be aware of you horse's limitations and do not push it beyond this point.
- Always stretch within the normal range of movement for the individual horse.
- Start small and build up gradually
- Over stretching can cause injury to your horse, listen if they show signs of discomfort and stop what you are doing.
- Passive stretching can be dangerous to you and can cause injury to your horse if done incorrectly.
- Do not attempt rehabilitative stretching unless you are suitably qualified
- It is advisable to seek your veterinarian's advice prior to commencing any stretching program.

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Fact sheet