

Stretches & R.O.M

Although horses, just like other mammals, instinctively know how to stretch, incorporating stretching into your routine will:

- Encourage relaxation & help reduce muscle tension & stiffness
- Increase flexibility & range of motion
- Prevent inflammation, trigger point & stress point formation
- Reduce the possibility of muscle strain or ligament sprain
- Improve coordination & reflex time response
- Help increase blood & lymph circulation, thereby improving tissue oxygenation & nutrition

Stretching Safely

Stretching should be smooth, fluid, and enjoyable for the horse. Any bouncing, pulling or sudden, jerky movements could cause injury to the horse or you. It is also important for you to use good posture, so you are not hurting your body or the horse in the process.

ALWAYS make sure that the horse's muscles are warm **BEFORE** you begin stretching. Walk or lunge the horse first or wait until after your ride to stretch. Trying to stretch cold muscles is not only unpleasant for the horse, but you are at a great risk of tearing them. This is due to the "stretch reflex", causing the muscle to contract and tighten.

Start with the easy stretch, only 75-80% of the muscles total capability and hold for 10-30 seconds. Also remember not to stretch in awkward angles or outside of a joints natural range of motion so not to cause injury to the horse.

After the horse can comfortably do the easy stretch, you can start what is called the development stretch. Begin with the easy stretch and once you have passed 30 seconds, ask for a little more stretch and hold for an additional 10-15 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.

Please remember that your horse will not be able to do more than the easy stretch the first few times. It will take regular stretching or "yoga" sessions for your horse to be able to get the full stretch, so be patient.

Carrot (Passive) Stretches

Lateral: Using a food incentive, ask the horse to stretch towards his point of hip and then towards his stifle. When truly flexible, should be able to almost touch point of hip and his stifle. This will stretch the bending muscles of the neck.

Flexion: With a treat, ask the horse to bring his nose towards his chest, then towards the point of each shoulder, to the outside of each leg & finally between the forelegs. This will stretch the extensor muscles of the neck.

Extension: Ask the horse to stretch as far upward & out as he can using a treat, but do not force it. This will stretch the flexor muscles of the neck.

Telescope: Make an "L" with each hand and cup the bottom of the neck right above the point of shoulder. Gently squeeze or push up the same angle of the shoulder. The equine should activate the splenius & rhomboids and stretch over your shoulder. This helps create space between lower cervical vertebrae.

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Foreleg Stretches

Shoulder Extension: Facing the horse, ask him to pick up his hoof. While supporting under his knee and fetlock, bring the leg forward at its natural angle from the shoulder. This will stretch all the fore muscles used during retraction.

Shoulder Flexion: To stretch the fore muscles used during protraction, pick the leg up and hold with one hand on fetlock and one above the knee. Carefully bring the leg backward until horse's forearm is at 90-degree angle to the ground.

Shoulder Rotation: While keeping the leg flexed at the knee (one hand on the knee joint & the other over the fetlock), initiate a slow, clockwise movement beginning by moving the leg medially, forward and then laterally. Repeat 3-5 times and then reverse the rotation (go counterclockwise). This will stretch the muscles used in adduction & abduction.

Hind Leg Stretches

Hip Extension: After you pick up the leg, hold behind fetlock and gently stretch the leg forward in its natural line of movement. This will stretch the hamstrings.

Hip Flexion: To stretch the muscles that flex the hip, with a hand above and below the fetlock, carefully bring the leg backwards. When leg is in position, have one hand above the hock to steady the horse for the duration of stretch.

Quadricep: While standing on the opposite side of the horse, pick up the leg and with your hands above and below the fetlock, bring the leg forward and under the horse's belly towards the opposite side front hoof. This will stretch the quadriceps, gluteus & fascia.

Back, Pelvis & Sling Stretches

Wither Lift: On the sternum (girth area between fore legs), scratch/squeeze to activate the thoracic sling & stretch upper thoracic vertebrae. Wither area will visibly lift between the shoulders. Start with holding for a few seconds, 3-5x before & after riding. Eventually would like to hold for 1-minute.

Pelvic Tilt: Seven inches off the top and to both sides of the tail, you will find a hard spot. With a hand on each, scratch/squeeze to cause a reflex action that results in the horse tucking the rump, lifting the ribs, and stretching the back upwards. Ask for the tuck and hold with pressure. Then ask for a little more and hold. Repeat until all the ribs are lifted and the back is lifting all the way to the withers. This activates lower abdominals & stretches extensor muscles.

Pelvic Lean: Stand on the opposite side of the horse, place the heel of your palm on the inside of point of buttock and slowly lean to apply pressure. Repeat on the opposite side. This will help release the sacrotuberose ligament and muscles that help stabilize the pelvis.

Belly Lift: Begin at the midline of the barrel towards the lower back and scratch or apply pressure asking your horse to lift the ribs and stretch the back. Each time you ask, slide your hands forward along the midline towards the withers. All the ribs should be able to lift as well as the spine all the way to wither.

Tail Pull: If your horse will allow it and only if your horse is safe to stand behind, gently pick up the tail and rotate it a few times. Then holding it line with the angle of the croup, use your body weight to gently pull on the tail. The horse should square up both rear hooves & pull against your traction. Hold for up to two minutes and release hold while coming back up to neutral slowly. This lengthens the spine and stretches pelvic flexors.