



8 Simple Exercises for Improved Flexibility & Strength

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Performing stretches before and after exercise has long been utilized as a preventative and therapeutic modality to optimize musculoskeletal health and safety. Prior to riding, stretching encourages balanced function, thereby helping prevent injury and optimize performance. After a ride, stretches will “reset” muscles back to their resting length and can reduce post-exercise soreness. Think of how much better you feel when you take the time to stretch – it only makes sense that our horse would enjoy the same benefit.

Most of us have had the pleasure of observing our horses

perform a luxurious, full-body stretch upon rising. Their wide yawns and contented expressions never fail to make us a smile. Looking closely, this unassisted, spontaneous action is essentially the body’s way of “awakening” the musculoskeletal system by increasing circulation and aligning muscle fibres.

Technically speaking, a stretch is the action of taking a muscle or muscle group past its resting length to its outer limit of pain-free range of motion. When we step in with physically “assisted” stretches we are using external guidance to encourage improved flexibility,

increased body awareness and an overall sense of well-being.

In this article, we will demonstrate how you can easily incorporate stretching into a routine with your horse. Before you get started, here are some common sense points to consider in preparation for a stretching routine:

► Your horse must be healthy and comfortable, free from abrasions, wounds and other injuries. If your horse is suffering

BENEFITS OF STRETCHING

- » Helps maintain muscle and joint health and range of motion
- » Provides the horse with a general sense of well-being, especially when done regularly
- » When used in combination with a cool-down, helps to reduce effects of muscle strain and re-align muscle fibres
- » Maintains and improves mobility and flexibility
- » Promotes symmetry by balancing muscle tension on both sides of the body
- » Can be used as an assessment tool to evaluate muscle

- the quality of the stretch.
- » Carrots are ideal bait for neck stretches, but a scoop of grain works well too.
 - » The duration of a stretch will vary with the horse's tolerance. A good timeframe is between 15-30 seconds. Ideally a stretch should be performed three times, unless otherwise indicated.

- » When you stretch before riding, it is important to provide a warm-up first. In other words, never stretch a cold muscle. Hand-walking or lunging for 10 minutes is adequate. If your horse is just coming in from a romp in the paddock, however, he should already be sufficiently warmed up.
- » After a ride, make sure that your horse is completely cooled out and relaxed before you stretch. An ideal time is after grooming (but before application of ointments, standing bandages or hoof oil).
- » The area you use should be quiet and clutter-free with firm, even footing and enough room to safely extend the limbs. A nice wide barn aisle, a quiet arena or an out-of-the-way place outside are all great options.
- » Having a handler makes the process safer and easier (especially when learning). If someone isn't available the horse should be in cross-ties with a lead rope handy for neck stretches.
- » The horse should be in a calm and cooperative state of mind. As with anything we ask of them, repetition, consistency and praise are crucial when teaching. Have patience and keep your expectations realistic. Some benefit can still be achieved even if the stretch isn't perfect.
- » Always start off each stretch with the horse standing squarely – this is important for balance and improves

Now you are ready! We are going to introduce you to some stretches that are easy to do and create flow, and with practise can be done fairly quickly. Doing them in the same order each time will help your horse grow accustomed to the routine.

STRETCHING FOR PERFORMANCE

Stretching can be particularly beneficial to performance horses that are frequently asked for extreme feats of flexibility and strength and are at greater risk of exercise induced injuries. It can also help maintain fitness and soundness in pleasure horses that aren't ridden with regularity or within an exercise program.



BACK STRETCHES

To mobilize the back, our goal is to alternately raise and lower the vertebral column (flexion and extension of the spine).



SPINAL FLEXOR STRETCH

Starting just behind the withers, position your hand so that it spans the back, but is not in contact with the spine. Using a gentle, even pressure, run your hand along the length of the back to the sacrum (point of the croup). The horse should react with a slight hollowing of the back. A horse that "drops" away profoundly under light pressure may be experiencing back pain, in which case, you should contact your veterinarian.

Follow immediately with an abdominal lift (see below).

GRACIE McDUFFE PHOTOS

ABDOMINAL LIFT

On the same side, stand beside the horse and scratch the middle of the abdomen firmly, just behind the girth, until the horse responds by raising its back. The added benefit of this action is the engagement of the abdominal muscles – the horse is essentially performing an equine sit-up.

Continue the action for as long as the horse is comfortable, alternating with the Spinal Flexor Stretch, for about three cycles, always ending with the Abdominal Lift.

Be cautious when doing this exercise with your horse for the first time. Horses with sensitive bellies may respond by kicking at their abdomen. In this case, shorten your duration, and start with a gentler touch. In contrast, others may need quite a bit of pressure to respond. In this case, don't be afraid to give a really good scratch!





3 GLUTEAL STIMULATION

This stretch also lifts the back, and provides additional benefit by activating the pelvis and the middle gluteal muscle.

Ensuring that it is safe to do so, stand behind the horse and scratch on either side of the tail for up to 10 seconds. As with the Abdominal Lift, you may have to experiment with location and pressure before the horse responds. Allow the horse to come back to a neutral position. Repeat two more times.

This stretch can be used in place of, or in addition to, the Abdominal Lift during the same series of stretches.

4 TAIL PULL

The tail in an extension of the spine, and during exercise helps to balance the pelvis.

Horses also are constantly using their tails to ward off flies and communicate, so it makes sense to cap off our back series with a gentle tail stretch.

Again, ensuring it is safe to proceed, grasp the tail a few inches below the final vertebrae, so you are only holding the hair. With a wide, secure stance, gently pull back, allowing the horse to adjust to the traction. Many horses will begin to pull forward so be prepared to secure your position as they do so. Hold the stretch for up to 20 seconds or until the horse changes position, being careful not to apply too much force as to overstretch.

Perform this stretch only once.



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SHOULDER STRETCHES

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SHOULDER FLEXOR STRETCH

The shoulder flexor muscles are numerous and can be prone to tension. For this reason, this is a great stretch to consistently include in your routine.

Begin by picking up the leg as if to clean the hoof. One hand at a time, release the fetlock and support the knee with both hands, keeping the joints in their proper anatomical alignment. Limbs should always be supported at the joints, being careful not to grab or squeeze tendons.

Slowly draw the limb forward and hold for 20-30 seconds, then gently release and guide the limb back to the ground, and repeat two more times. Be sure to stretch both shoulders to promote balance.



NECK & TRUNK STRETCHES



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NECK EXTENSOR STRETCH

This stretch affects the muscles above the vertebrae that extend the neck forward and usually takes some practise.

Standing at the shoulder, use a carrot to encourage the horse to move his chin toward the chest, keeping it just out of reach. Continue to move the treat between the forelegs toward the fetlocks, keeping the neck and head as straight as possible.

Keeping the carrot just out of reach will encourage the horse to hold the position for an adequate duration. Allow the head and neck to return to neutral and repeat two more times.

Over time, you will notice that range of motion will increase and the stretch will be performed with more ease and coordination.



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NECK FLEXOR STRETCH

This stretch targets the muscles that flex the neck, below (ventral) to the cervical vertebrae. Stand in front of the horse and, using a carrot as bait, guide the head and neck forward and up. The head should be rotated slightly to allow freedom of the spinous processes.

Allow the horse to have the carrot and bring the neck back to the resting position. Repeat two more times.



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LATERAL TRUNK STRETCH

It is important to do this stretch on both sides so that the trunk is evenly stretched. Again, with a carrot, slowly encourage your horse to reach around towards the point of the hip or as far as they are comfortable. It is important to move with the horse's motion so that you remain in a safe place without interfering with the stretch. Repeat two more times.

You may have to stand the horse next to a wall so that he does not attempt to move his whole body rather than stretching the trunk. **CHA**

Thank you to the connections of the lovely Abbey Road FF for allowing her to be the model in our demonstration photos.