

Equine stretch sessions

This series of articles comes to you from Carolyn Kutchyera of Backstretch Equine & Canine Massage. Photos by Dennis Smith.

Refer to the description of bony landmarks and muscles in your October 10 edition of Horse Country (7-2011), or go to www.horsecountry.ca/archives.htm to see an online version of the article. Also see "Getting under Guinny's skin" in our August edition (6-2011) also available online. Additional photos to help you understand each stretch are also available at the same URL.

In the last two issues, we discussed how the muscles work, how they contract and extend to produce movement, which muscle groups are at work in different motions, and how to spot anomalies in the gaits.

This time, we look how adding stretches to your routines will help to maintain your horse's muscle health, tone and flexibility.

As explained in the last article, it is the contraction of the muscle that provides the power. Think of the leg pushing off on a stride as a coiled spring – the more it can contract or coil, the more forceful the push off will be. Muscles that are well toned, with no restrictions (such as a knot or adhesion), and that are able to extend long and freely, will be able to 'coil', or contract more. This gives more power, flexibility, and shock absorption ability.

Regular correct stretching will help elongate muscles for better contractile ability and will increase a limb's range of motion, which allows for more economic movement (less exertion and strides to cover ground = less energy used and less fatigue). Stretching also promotes realignment of muscle fibres, which reduces the chances for knots and adhesions to take hold, and helps to reduce scar tissue; it contributes to more pliable and elastic muscles which improves recovery time, reduces risk of injury, and promotes suppleness and core strength.

Before we look at the stretches, it is very important to note your own body

mechanics for applying the stretches. None of the stretches should cause you any strain or pain! If you injure yourself, you will be of no benefit to your horse, so you need to put your safety and comfort first. At no time should your back be doing any of the work. I refer to the 'column of support' frequently – this refers to you taking the weight of a horse's limb from your arm down through your leg by resting your elbow on your knee. Note your environment to ensure there aren't any potential distractions that may get in the way if you need to step back quickly, such as loose dogs, children running about, or sharp equipment lying around. Biting insects are also something you may need to control in the summer. The footing should be level and non-slip (for both you and your horse's sake). Be very aware of your horse's reactions, and keep out of the way of potential reactive kicks (even the quietest horse can react).

Stretching sessions are best done AFTER a warm up; you will get much more effective stretches if the muscle is already warmed up. Stretching a cold muscle can cause

micro tears, and the muscle will not be pliable enough to stretch to the same extent as a muscle with good blood flow. For peak performance, do your warm up ride, stretch, and continue with your work session. Otherwise, stretch after your ride, or after the area is warmed up with massage. If you stretch several times a week, you should see improvements in about three months.

The stretching session should start with a gentle circling of the limb to relax the horse and ensure they are receptive to stretches. Make sure your horse is more or less squared up. Stretching is a slow action – you are inviting the limb, never pulling. Joints especially should not be pulled (try it on yourself to see why)! Your hand placement is important – don't grip tendons or ligaments; the lower hand supports the limb, the upper hand applies an inviting pressure. Stretch to the first resistance point, hold and breathe, then ask for a little more stretch – you will usually get another inch or two. Allow your horse to learn what is expected of him or her! Keep the hold times short when

introducing stretches to a horse, and give lots of praise. Never torque a joint – stretch in the natural line of movement. Give your horse room to move and react, preferably ground tie, or have someone hold your horse. Their reactions are valuable feedback – listen to them, don't assume they are misbehaving. If something is uncomfortable for them to do, back off on the pressure, and allow them to learn what you're doing. NEVER pull a limb. If you are fighting with your horse, you are not stretching at all, and are damaging the trust you need to perform the stretches. If your horse resists, try to keep your hands on the limb, but let them dictate where they are comfortable holding it. Once settled, try small circles, put the foot down and reward. If there is any lameness, swelling, or heat, talk to your vet before resuming stretches.

Because of the layering of the muscles (there are four layers), it is most effective to stretch in the following order: 1) fore limbs 2) hind limbs 3) poll and neck 4) back and barrel. Hold times for horses new

to stretching: less than 10 seconds, Intermediate: less than 15 seconds, Advanced: about 30 seconds. Always place the leg down gently after the stretch.

Some basic stretches to get you started are shown below and on pages 12 and 13. Further photos can be found at www.horsecountry.ca/archives.htm.

Scientific advancements.

The methods we use in physical fitness are constantly changing. Ballistic stretching (bouncing to force the muscles longer) used to be what was taught to athletes, we now know that this can cause micro-tears in the muscle fibres and is not good for muscle health.

Lactic acid used to be touted as a toxic waste build up that caused muscle soreness and needed to be massaged or worked out. Science has now proven that this is not the case, despite even very recent publications discussing the evils of lactic acid. Lactic acid is in fact produced by the muscles as a 'fuel' during anaerobic

activity (short bursts of high-intensity activity, where the muscles' demand for oxygen exceeds the oxygen supply available)*.

Science will continue to discover more thoroughly how bodies function, and will continually present different and better ways of maintaining and improving muscle health. It is our responsibility as owners to be aware of new research and not get stuck in one way of doing things. The stretches presented here will definitely benefit your horse with science's current understanding of biomechanics, but keep alert to advances in understanding as science discovers more about performance and peak muscle function.

I encourage you to add stretching to your horse's routine, as well as your own! If you suspect anything is out of the ordinary, stop the stretches and check in with your vet. Enlist the help of a professional if you have any questions on stretching technique or your own body mechanics. Happy stretching! 🐾

*www.nytimes.com/2006/05/16/health/nutrition/16run.html
www.coryholly.com/articles/article.cfm?id=35

Forelimbs:

Be aware of the potential for your horse to strike upward: keep your face out of range.

Stretching the front of the shoulder and pectorals:

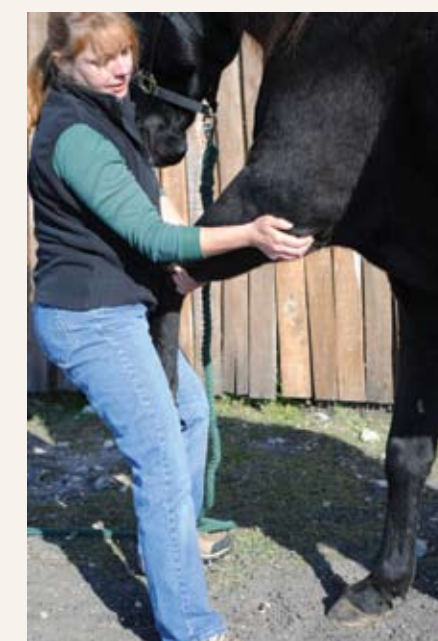
Your starting position should be as if you were picking out the hoof. Cradle the fetlock with your elbow on your knee (the column of support). Move the leg in slow circles both directions (yes, your whole body will circle too). Stand up a little straighter (no longer with your elbow on your knee) align your thigh (just above the knee) with the horse's carpal joint. Using your leg to apply pressure by raising your heel, push the horse's bent leg towards the back.

Triceps stretch:

Facing back, pick up the horse's foreleg, allow his/her carpal joint to bend over your hand. Support the leg from this position. Place your other hand on the elbow and invite it forward. If you do a full leg stretch, make sure the carpal joint maintains a bend.

Lateral leg stretch:

From the same starting position as above (with your hand supporting the bent carpal joint), align your near hip with the side of their leg. Slowly push your hip over, moving their leg across their chest.



Triceps stretch

continued on page 12

Hind Leg stretches:



to the horse). With your leg, guide your horse's hind leg to stretch out behind him/her. Alternately, you can hold the leg in your hands, one hand supporting the fetlock, the other supporting the cannon or upper leg (you can use your forearm too), and with your elbow resting on your knee (the one supporting the fetlock), you can ask for the same movement.

Hamstring stretch:

(Demonstrated above.)

Stand at the horse's barrel facing back, pick up the leg by the fetlock, and invite it forward (use your column of support). A reminder to take it to the first point of resistance, stop, breathe, and then ask for a little more.

Quadriceps stretch:

Start as if you were to pick out your horse's hind hoof. With a wide stance (on your part), allow their hind leg to rest on your thigh (the one nearest

Tail pull:

Engages the abdominals.

This is actually not a pull at all. Stand beside the horse's back leg, a couple of feet away from them, facing back. Grasp the base of the tail and provide gentle resistance to the side. Do not pull, but allow the horse to lean away from you – they control the amount of pressure.

Pelvic tilt:

Engages the iliopsoas and flexes the lumbosacral joint.

Only perform this if you are completely comfortable in knowing your horse won't kick, but be prepared in case they do.

Standing directly behind your horse facing them, stimulate this reflex by rubbing with the side of your thumbs on either side of the tail base. Some horses respond to a lower hand placement, or to rubbing directly on the tail base. We do not want to see a sharp tilt of the pelvis (ballistic), but a slower movement.

Lateral Quadriceps stretch:

Also affects the lumbar region to a degree. Horses generally really like this one.

Standing at the barrel facing back, ask for the horse's opposite hind leg. Until the horse learns this stretch, you may want to enlist the help of someone to pass the leg to you. Invite the leg under the belly towards you, with the hock coming in front of the other leg.

Carrot stretches for neck and back:

Try to avoid ballistic movements such as a horse bouncing to reach farther. Note, while I use a carrot in this description, it is ideal to teach your horse to perform these stretches without luring with a carrot. If you do use a carrot, try to get the longest ones you can.

a) With your back against his/her shoulder, ask the head and neck to curl around you towards the hip.

b) Perform this same stretch without curling around your body. These two stretches engage different parts of the neck.

c) Ask the horse to bring its head to the side by the leg near the ground.

d) Stretch up to the side, out to the side, out to the front – use all the space around to mobilize the neck. This becomes more of a range of motion exercise rather than a held stretch. Try to discourage the horse from twisting its head.

e) Bring the head down and between the legs (illustrated right). Do not bring the head up much more than the carpal joints.



Back and Barrel:

Note: Some horses are very sensitive under the belly and will not tolerate these stretches.

Paraspinal stretch:

Stand facing your horse at the ribcage. Place one hand on your horse's neck to encourage it to bend away from you, reach under the belly with your other hand, and with your fingers, tickle a little behind the elbow, or where your foot might be when riding. We're looking for the back to bend like a croissant – a very small movement – you may need an observer to tell you if it is happening.

Sternal and belly lifts:

Engages the abdominal muscles (this can be done anytime, not just after a ride):

Standing beside your horse, place your hands between the front legs and stroke back along the centre of the underside to get them used to where your hands will be. If they are okay with this, start again, using upward pressure from your fingertips. The withers should lift, then the back as you run along. This is particularly useful for horses beginning to get a sway back.

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This article follows on from the article "Getting under Guimny's skin..." in our 6-2011 issue and "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man." in Issue 7-2011. See both these article at www.horsecountry.ca/archives.htm. plus a wider selection of demonstration pictures for the stretches and lifts described.

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