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Horse Stretching Benefits, Approaches Detailed

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Every good athlete knows the benefits of an effective regular stretching routine. But what about your performance horse? Horses are athletes, too, and according to new research, they need that stretching just as much as their human counterparts do.

Proper stretching can increase flexibility and range of motion (ROM), relieve certain kinds of joint and muscle pain, improve performance, and help prevent injuries, according to Ava Frick, DVM, CAC, veterinary medical director at the Animal Fitness Center in Union, Mo., and author of the study.

Muscles and connective tissue naturally tend to stiffen if they are overused or underused, Frick said. "Stiffness can result in injury, lead to inactivity, and eventually speed up the aging process of the musculoskeletal system. To remain supple, the connective tissue and muscles need regular stretching."

"Improved flexibility is achieved when stretching becomes a regular part of the horse's athletic routine."

—Dr. Ava Frick

Stretching also provides a pain-relieving effect, which might be due to an increased pain threshold or simply because the muscle becomes stronger. Through a regular stretching program, muscles become stronger and thus able to absorb more energy, which also reduces injury. "The more energy muscle can absorb, the more resistant the muscle is to injury," Frick said.

Despite the benefits, a horse cannot be made to stretch on command, she said. It's therefore up to the handlers to take things into their own hands--literally. Through a series of techniques, humans can effectively stretch their horses both before and after a workout by gently pulling in the right places for the right amount of time.

"A regular stretching routine ... is important for all performance horses but is especially important for stalled horses," Frick said, as these horses have few opportunities to bend and flex their joints and muscles independently in an open field.

Warming up of the muscles is necessary in addition to stretching, as it gets the body ready for "vigorous exercise," she said. However, a standard warmup in the saddle, or even pre-workout longeing, does not qualify as proper stretching.

With a regular routine consisting of a few three-to-five-minute exercises several days a week, horses can begin to show improvement in as early as one week, Frick said. If a horse has still shown no improvement after four to six weeks, the program should be altered or even discontinued.

The exercises are designed to help the joints and tissue in the legs, hips, neck, abdomen, and back, according to the study. They should be carried out in a calm area where both the horse and the handler feel relaxed, as the stretching will be more productive if the muscles are not tense.

Each program should be considered individual to each horse, depending on its history and needs, Frick said. A health care professional with experience and specialized training in stretching techniques should evaluate the horse and design the program, which can then be taught to the handler. The goals of the program should be made clear from the beginning. Indicators that the program is working need to be defined, as well as signs--such as lack of improvement or an unwillingness to do the exercises--that the program should be stopped.

The handler will need clear descriptions and photos, as well as hands-on training, to properly perform the stretching techniques, Frick said. Even so, the task is certainly not limited to professionals only. "Anyone can learn to be effective and safe at stretching a horse," she said. "The best administrator would be the owner, handler, or trainer, as they could potentially be with the horse daily and can maintain a consistent program.

"Improved flexibility is achieved when stretching becomes a regular part of the horse's athletic routine," she added.

One common stretching exercise is the Forward Pull-Hind Limb Protraction, in which the handler holds the hind leg just above the pastern and gently pulls forward. This flexes the hip and extends the hamstring while engaging the lower back.

The Quadriceps Extension-Hind Limb Retraction exercise also results in an extension of the hip area by working the quadriceps group of muscles. The handler holds the back leg at the pastern and just above the hock, pulling directly backwards. This also causes the lower back to flex.

In the Rear Leg Crossover stretch, one hind leg is pulled carefully across the underside of the horse past the other leg. This stretches the gluteal muscles and the tensor fascia latae muscles of the thigh while rotating the back to the side of the stretch.

Regardless of the exercise, handlers should keep in mind that the goal is not to stretch as far as you can but to lengthen out the tissues and "put just a little healthy tension on them," Frick said.

By reading about techniques and having some hands-on training, any owner can help their equine athletes benefit from the many advantages of stretching familiar to humans for decades.

The study, "Stretching Exercises for Horses: Are They Effective?" was published in the January 2010 edition of the *Journal of Equine Veterinary Science* ([abstract](#)) and provides the scientific background for Frick's book, *Fitness in Motion* (2008, The Lyons Press).

**Readers are cautioned to seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian
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