

Equine Conditioning

Carrot Stretches Hilary M. Clayton BVMS

The stretches are chin to chest, chin between fetlocks, chin to girth, chin to flank, chin to hock and chin between knees. Try to get your horse to hold each stretched position for a few seconds before allowing him to take the bait, and then let the muscles relax before repeating the stretch. When your horse is learning these exercises, be happy with a little stretching and then increase it gradually over time. The key is that your horse should stretch as far as he can without losing his balance. Even without maximal stretching, these exercises are useful for activating the muscles that round and bend the back and that stabilize the joints of the back and neck. The sideways stretches are performed both to the left and right sides. Carrot stretches are much more than just a way to stretch your horse's neck and back. As he reaches downward or sideways to follow the movement of the carrot (or other treat) with his head and neck, the muscles that move and stabilize the joints in his neck and back are activated. These muscles are very important during locomotion when they hold the back in a rounded shape and prevent small amounts of motion between the vertebrae that predispose the area to the development of arthritis.

Research studies have shown that regular performance of carrot stretches stimulates enlargement of the muscles that stabilize the horse's back and protect against the development of spinal arthritis. Doing them immediately prior to the start of exercise each day preactivates the stabilizing muscles in preparation for the work that follows. Horses who have spent the last few hours standing in a stall need a longer period of walking and more gradual warm-up than horses who have been wandering around in the pasture all day. Also, many older horses with osteoarthritis will benefit from a longer, slower warm-up. Walking activates the muscles, stretches the ligaments and tendons and moves the joints so the joint fluid circulates between the contact surfaces. During exercise, the muscles generate heat, and the harder the horse works, the more heat accumulates in the body. In cold weather, heat is lost easily, but in hot, humid weather it can be difficult for your horse to cool down. After dismounting, observe how he is breathing, which is a good indicator of heat stress. If he is taking rapid, shallow breaths, then he's panting in an effort to lose heat. Panting is a sign that your horse will benefit from having some help in cooling out. *If your horse is panting after your ride, cold-hose him for one minute, scrape off the water and walk him for one minute, repeat as necessary.*

Secrets to a Successful Ride Gabby Gufler

* If you are trail riding and won't have the best cell service, be sure to let someone know where you are going and when you expect to be back, or leave a note on your stall or dashboard.

* Wear a helmet, ride with a friend (good for your horse, too), Carry your ID as well as your emergency contacts (pin it to your jacket like in kindergarten, tape it in your helmet) and attach emergency contact info on your horse in case you become separated. * If you have a stall or paddock, leave the door closed, so if your horse returns without you, hopefully someone will notice. * Know "your" horse's vital signs.

Conditioning Matthew Mackay Smith, DVM

If your horse has been in pasture with other horses all winter in a space that allows acres of "running" room per horse, he has probably been more active than you think, and you can have him ready for long trail rides in about a month. If he has been stabled much of the winter or in a paddock space that doesn't encourage play, it may take you two or three months to get him fit.

In general, you'll want to ride three days a week and keep your horse in a large pasture or turnout the other days. Start with 30-minute rides and gradually, over a four-week period, work up to 90 minutes per ride. For the first few rides, walk for 15 minutes of the ride and trot for 15 minutes, breaking those minutes up into any increments you'd like. Over time you can add canter work. A good four-week goal is 90-minute rides with 20 minutes at the walk, 50 minutes at the trot and 20 minutes at the canter, again, broken up and ridden in any order you'd like. Where you ride is also important. If you are training for trail work, by all means, ride on the trails.

As your horse's fitness increases, you will notice that the work will become less laborious for him and his pulse recovery after fast work or big hills will drop into the 60s in five minutes or less. Once you've gotten a horse fit, it isn't difficult to keep him that way. Horses retain their condition much better than people do. Continue riding two or three days a week with continuous turnout as much as possible.

Julie Goodnight A horse in average condition can usually handle a one- to two-hour trail ride on the weekends without too much stress. For your horse to build up condition for long summer rides, he'll need increasingly longer periods of time with you in the saddle. If you'll be riding your horse in the mountains, you'll have to condition him to hills, as well as walking on shifting rocks and through other challenging terrain. Your horse will also need increasingly longer periods of time with you in the saddle. Weight-bearing conditioning helps him improve his balance and stamina, and helps get him in shape much more quickly than round-pen exercise or longeing. Sand builds condition and strength more than solid ground does. However, stay at a walk to avoid tendon injury. Schedule at least 90 calendar days of conditioning before your first big daylong ride. It usually takes 30 calendar days of a conditioning program before you'll see physical changes in your horse. Start by riding your horse three days per week for the first 30 days. Then add a fourth day and longer rides.

Lari Shea "With conditioning, nearly any sound horse can go on a 15- to 20-mile adventurous trail ride in a day, and can eventually go on a week-long trail ride, where you're riding 10 to 25 miles a day. This is entirely within the realm of possibility of most any horse. Preparation will ensure both you and your horse are fit and experienced for what you're doing, so you can enjoy your rides to the max."

Make sure this is a horse you genuinely like and want to spend hours riding.

In the wild, horses actually condition themselves to some degree, averaging 20 miles per day in their hunt for forage. Most of this is done at a walk, but it gives them a "bottom," which is the foundation for conditioning. "The first year of conditioning, your horse has more heart than legs," cautions Shea. "Your job is not to ask him how fast and for how long he feels like galloping, but to gradually toughen up his locomotive system to handle the stress that his conditioned metabolic system can put on him." A proper conditioning program involves carefully monitored stress of your horse's entire body. "You want to stress the body, but not to the point of distress." Start your horse's conditioning program with long, slow miles. Endurance riders refer to this as long, slow, distance work, or LSD. Over time, you can increase the distance, speed, and difficulty of terrain. Never increase more than one element at a time. You can increase the distance, speed, or difficulty of terrain on one or a series of rides, but not two or more at once.

At the walk, note that there's no *moment of suspension*, where all four feet are off the ground, so it's the easiest gait on your horse's body. You'd be surprised how much condition your horse can gain by walking, especially if you're riding up steep hills or in deep sand. Walk your horse as much as you can, and encourage a long-strided walk. "A good horse looks like a panther at the walk, loosely slinking along. "Horses vary greatly in speed at the walk, from two to five miles per hour, typically," says Shea.

"Some horses can 'power walk' at five to six miles per hour. The trot is an efficient gait, because your horse has two diagonal legs on the ground at all times. This means he always has some support on both sides, as well as on the front and hind end. As you trot, consider posting. "It's easier on your horse if you post the trot rather than sit it, your weight is distributed between your stirrups, as well as your seat, calves, knees, and thighs. Switch your posting diagonal every mile or so, so you're not always on the same muscles in your horse's back."

"Don't ask for too much in the beginning. A horse will almost always want to do more than is good for him when he's not fit, so the rider has to be the brains of the team."

Walk your horse the last mile at the end of each ride to help him cool down, consider dismounting and walking your horse from the ground.

"They say a horse only has so many downhill miles in him, so slower is better than faster when riding downhill. (I often get off and hand walk down longer or steep hills – AG)

Check your horse's fitness level by checking his pulse immediately after a brisk hour-long ride. Note the initial rate, and recheck every few minutes until it's down to 60 beats per minute (BPM). A fit horse will drop to this rate within 5 to 15 minutes. "If it takes 30 minutes or more for your horse to recover to 60 BPM, you're working him way too hard for his degree of condition," says Shea. "Back off, find the level that he can handle, and gradually increase the duration and intensity of his workouts from there. A normal resting mature riding horse has a pulse rate of 32 to 40 beats per minute (BPM).

Dehydration is one of the greatest dangers during conditioning. To check your horse's dehydration level, perform a *skin response indication*, known as the "pinch test. "To do so, pinch a section of skin in the middle of your horse's neck, then gently pull it out, and release. Normally hydrated skin will spring back into place in one second or less. As a horse becomes more dehydrated, the skin is less elastic and may take two or even three seconds to pop back. Help avoid dehydration by allowing your horse to eat and drink along the trail, especially when it's hot and you're riding all day. You can carry a plastic scoop or sponge tied to your saddle, and use this to wet down (and then scrape) your horse any time you encounter water. Focus on his neck, chest, belly, and inside of his hind legs where you see large blood vessels. This helps cool the blood circulating through his body. "Wetting your horse down and scraping as often as possible saves him from trying to cool himself by sweating". Be aware your horse can't cool down as easily when it's both hot and humid. During the cool-down period, allow your horse to drink as much as he wants to, even if he's still warm.

Getting Horses Fit – Joe Chisholm

Working the horse to become strong enough to complete long or hard rides without damage.

TIME SCALES

The time it takes for various body tissues to adapt and condition, are as follows:

Heart and lungs 3 months

Muscles 3-6 months

Tendons and ligaments 6-12 months

Hooves 7 months

Bone 1-3 years

A horse can be got fit enough to go fast in a relatively short period, but will not be conditioned to withstand injury. Only after 3 seasons (provided he had no serious tendon/ligament injuries) will he be thoroughly conditioned to be ridden hard.

The goal is to build a broad foundation of stamina by riding long distances slowly.

Build the horse up gradually to maximum work.

A stressful session should be followed by a day of recovery.

Beating the Metabolic Pull – Hydration Susan Garlinghouse, MS

What exactly does water do in the body, anyway? One of the most critical roles is the removal of excess heat during exercise. Horses that are dehydrated progressively lose their ability to produce sweat, a condition called anhidrosis, resulting in loss of cooling and a concurrent rise in body temperatures. (The heart rate will increase to compensate)

Main strategies;

Maximize forage intake for several days before a ride, including the use of "super fibers" such as beet pulp. Pre-load with electrolytes the night before. Provide small, frequent meals along the trail by carrying feed or intermittent grazing. Anything provided in a syringe (oral electrolytes) should be given in small doses at frequent intervals, preferably after a drink

Preventing Dehydration, Gayle Ecker

With exercise, the body temperature rises. This heat must be dissipated or the horse will literally “cook”! The body cools itself through sweating, and this is especially important for the exercising horse. The sweat contains water and electrolytes, or salts. When the body loses water and electrolytes, various functions are compromised and the health of the horse can be a risk. To ensure that your horse remains healthy, it's important to effectively replace the water and electrolytes. Sudden decrease in electrolytes can cause muscle problems and heat stress injuries. There may not be enough salt in feed to replace those losses.

You cannot make up for poor conditioning with extra electrolytes.

For many horses, the salt block will not give them enough salt. For these horses, you can place a small container fixed to the wall to hold free-running salt. The day before a long trailer ride or event, it may be beneficial to give the horse a dose of electrolytes to build up a reservoir in the gut. Do not give electrolytes to a horse that is already dehydrated. Do not use electrolyte preparations with glucose or other sugars listed as one of the first ingredients.

I feed 2oz salt daily in supplements, 4-6oz the night before if I expect my horse to experience a high degree of stress, exercise, or heat. This insures that he will “tank up” and be well hydrated before we even begin. It also encourages drinking strange water in strange places (AG)

Rider Conditioning

Lari Shea - Proper hydration suppresses appetite, increases metabolism, improves complexion, and helps your body function at its best without bloat or fatigue. Aim to drink your bodyweight in ounces of water per day. Start with eight, 8-ounce servings

Pre- and mid-ride stretches;

1-Reach overhead as high as possible, then alternate which arm reaches higher, climbing an imaginary rope ladder

2-Sit on the floor with legs slightly apart, bend forward with a flat back, stretching the back of your thighs. Then relax as your fingers reach toward the ground. Don't bounce: there's no need to actually touch your toes. Alternate stretching toward your right toe, then left, back to center, bend your knees as you stand back up.

3-Bend at the waist to the left, then right. With hands on hips, twist to look behind you each direction. 4-Shrug your shoulders up and down, forward and back a few times, then do gentle neck rolls in each direction. 5-Windmill your arms front to back, back to front, and around to sides. 6-Bend one leg to the side, straightening and stretching the opposite leg. Repeat on other side. 7-Face forward, stretch on leg behind and bend the forward knee. Stretch your hind heel toward the ground. Switch legs (lunge) 8-Squat down in a plie, keeping your back straight.

9-Balance on one foot, bend and hug your other knee toward your chest. Repeat on other side.

10-Jog in place for three of four steps. Your horse will soon learn that this means you're about to mount up.

Your core muscles control your hip mobility and stability sitting on your horse, postural stamina, and independence of shoulders and hips. They are responsible for your control over seat and leg placement. Protecting your spine so that it is free to absorb your horse/s motion without injury, and returning you to straight symmetrical posture after a dynamic interruption (such as posting trot, a change in gait, a spook, or a fence).

Your core muscles are the bridge connecting your upper and lower body and providing an “anchor” for your shoulders and your legs.

Do reverse sit-ups. This is a good exercise for the back and core, and it doesn't require as much coordination as yoga. Lie with your back on the floor and your knees flexed. Now lift your knees towards your head instead of the other way around. Repeat as many times as you would do a normal sit up. This move is better for your abs and doesn't shorten your hip flexors. It's important that those are loose for riding

Interesting - Humans are very one sided; we develop that way, we work that way, we rest that way and we accept we are right or left handed. Horse riding is NOT one-sided; we want our horses to be great on both reins, we train it, we practice it, and we expect it. We want the horse to be symmetrical, and the rider must be the same.