

Stretch Your Horse: There's an App for That!

Enhance Performance. Prevent Injury. Save Money Too!

By: Ilene Nessenson, JD, Certified Equine Body Worker
Owner, Holistic Horse Bodyworks, LLC and Stretch Your Horse

We have all it heard many times.... Stretch your muscles before and after you exercise. But, did you ever stop and think that this applies to your horse too? Your horse is an athlete, and just like human athletes (and non-athletes too!), their muscles need attention to remain healthy.

What are the Benefits of Horse Stretching?

A horse's muscles can become tight, stiff, sore, strained or even develop tears. Stretching the muscles is an important part of maintaining overall muscle health. "We do not think enough about injury prevention. By warming up the horse and putting it through some stretches, we can increase range of motion and enable the horse to perform more fluidly and to the best of its ability," said Dr. Jack Root, DVM, Oakhurst Equine Veterinary Services and Owner, Grindstone 1996 Kentucky Derby winner.

The benefits obtained by safely and effectively stretching a horse's muscles are:

- Helps improve flexibility and range of motion (ROM) thereby enabling the horse to perform to the best of their ability
- Helps prevent injury by strengthening supportive tissue and helping to guard against muscle tightness and tendon shortening
- Helps reduce post-exercise soreness, stiffness and muscle fatigue
- Helps improve disposition by relaxing the horse
- Helps provide early warning signs of a potential injury and can aid in injury rehabilitation
- Helps the rider bond with their horse

Why Does Stretching Help? Just a Bit of Science....

Muscles are made up of several muscle bundles, which in turn are made up of muscle fibers. Muscle fibers have bundles of myofibrils, which are rod-like structures that run parallel to one another. Muscle is covered by fascia, a fibrous tissue, to which other muscles can attach. Muscles attach to bone via tendons.

When a muscle is overused or underused, the afore-mentioned structures respond by shrinking or tightening which can cause stiffness, discomfort and negatively impact performance. As explained by Dr. Ava Frick, DVM, "Stiffness can result in injury, leading to inactivity, and eventually speed up the aging of the musculoskeletal system. To remain supple, the connective tissue and muscles need regular stretching. Stretching helps resist the gradual shortening and tightening of tissue that otherwise sets in from both underuse and overuse, reducing discomfort and slowing the progressive loss of capacity that accompanies tightening." See [Stretching Exercises for Horses: Are They Effective?](#), Dr. Ava Frick, DVM, Journal of Equine Veterinary Science, Vol. 30 No. 1 (2010)

How Do I Know What Stretches Would Be Good for My Horse?

Horses can have differing areas of muscle tightness that need attention just like humans. Key factors affecting muscle flexibility include: riding discipline, conformation, saddle fit (or lack thereof), nutrition, amount of turnout, current or prior injury, and hoof balance. However, there are several stretches that are helpful for almost all horses.

A Few Universally Beneficial Stretches...

Hamstring Stretch: Forward Farrier Low, High and Variations

All horses, regardless of riding discipline, use their hamstring muscles to help propel themselves forward. Forward Farrier stretches the hamstring muscles (semitendinosus, semimembranosus and biceps femoris) located near the hind end of the horse's body and the back of the hind legs making it beneficial for almost all horses.

The Forward Farrier stretch involves picking up the back leg in a specific manner and stretching it in a straight line toward the front leg. It can be done in a low position, about 2 inches off the ground, and in a high position, about 6-8 inches off the ground. The low position is depicted in the photo. Once you and your horse master the low and high positions, there are also variations of Forward Farrier such as the Forward Farrier Cross-Through and Abducted Forward Farrier.

Forward Farrier Cross-Through involves picking up the back leg and crossing it under the horse's body through to the other side. This not only stretches the hamstrings, it also stretches the tensor fasciae latae located near the point of hip.

Abducted Forward Farrier involves picking up the back leg and moving it away from the horse's body. (Abduction means moving away from the midline of the body.) In addition to the hamstrings, all of the muscles on the inside of the horse's leg are stretched including the gracilis and the sartorius. Most horses are not used to having their leg moved away from their body in this manner, so a gentle progression starting with 2-4 inches of stretch is highly recommended.

Pec Stretch: Abducted Lateral Bent Front Leg

Most horses also benefit greatly from pectoral muscle stretches regardless of discipline. The "pecs" are located in the front of the horse's body, and extend into the armpit and the girth/cinch area. A great stretch for the pecs is the Abducted Lateral Bent Front Leg Stretch which involves bending the leg and moving it away from the horse's body (abduction) while standing at the horse's side (lateral means side) as depicted in the photo. This stretch can also help to relieve girthyness or cinchyness when done in combination with massage and determining the correct girth or cinch for your horse.

How Can I Learn to Safely and Effectively Stretch My Horse?

“The stretches Ilene taught me were a wonderful addition to my lesson horse Wyatt’s regimen. I was so impressed with the results, I started doing stretches with all of my horses, and I taught all of my students how to do stretches too! I highly recommend stretching to anyone who wants to do everything possible to help their horse be successful in their work and happy in their body. ”

Andrea Quale, Trainer
AndreasHorseTraining.com

The great news is that everyone can learn to safely and effectively stretch their horse’s muscles regardless of riding ability or experience. In fact, there is a mobile app called Stretch Your Horse designed to help you do just that!

The Stretch Your Horse App contains more than 20 individual stretching videos that can be downloaded to an iPhone or Android phone. No cell service or internet connection is needed after the initial download. The videos reside on the rider’s phone. Videos can be replayed as many times as desired right at your horse’s side. It is almost like getting personalized instruction!

The Stretch Your Horse App also contains a free Introduction to Horse Stretching video that explains the top 10 things you need to know to safely and effectively stretch your horse.

Help get the word out about the importance of stretching! It is an important, though often overlooked, aspect of horse healthcare. “If you want to enhance your horse’s performance, prevent injury and save money on vet and bodyworker bills, I highly recommend stretching!” said Rebekah Larimer, Trainer, RebekahLarimerTraining.com

The Stretch Your Horse App is available in the Apple App Store and Google Play Store. You can also check out StretchYourHorse.com for more details.

Get Your Stretch On!

About the Author and App Creator

Ilene Nessenson, JD, is the owner and creator of the Stretch Your Horse App and the owner of [Holistic Horse Bodyworks, LLC](http://HolisticHorseBodyworks,LLC). Ilene is a Certified Equine Bodyworker, English and Western saddle fitter and English saddle reflocker. She is also a Certified Thermal Imaging Technician, Certified Yoga Instructor and certified in the application of elastic kinesiology tape for horses. She is also an attorney and member of the Oregon State Bar (though she no longer practices law.) Visit www.StretchYourHorse.com for more details.

