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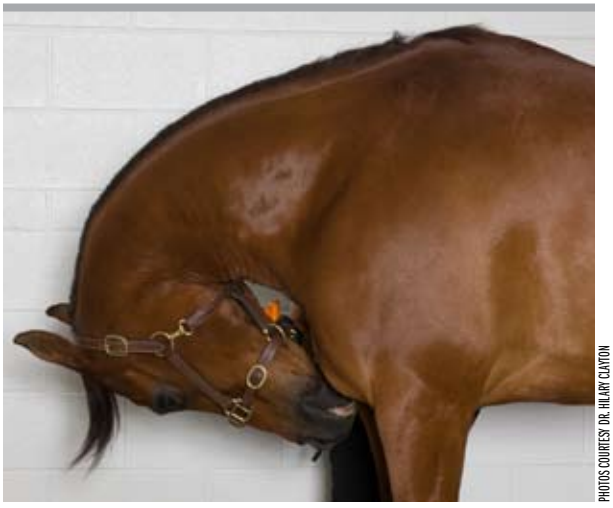
Special Report

Top 5 Stretches for Healthy Horses

From "carrot stretches" to strengthening movements, physical therapy exercises can benefit horses in all lines of work. Hilary M. Clayton, BVMS, PhD, MRCVS, Dipl ACVSMR, Mary Anne McPhail Dressage Chair in Equine Sports Medicine at Michigan State University, shared with The Horse her top five physical therapy exercise picks for healthy horses. Here, Narelle Stubbs, BApp-Sc (PT), MAnimSt (Animal Physiotherapy), PhD, demonstrates the stretches.

She recommends completing three to five repetitions of each exercise during each session. "We don't have any proof that it's the magical number, but I think five of each exercise would give you a really significant strength training effect over time.

"I think in the beginning it's quite good to do them every day, but you don't need to lose sleep if you miss a day," she adds. "For maintenance, aim for four to five days per week."



PHOTOS COURTESY DR. HILARY CLAYTON

1 Chin-to-Chest Stretch Clayton explains that this carrot stretch (which is accomplished with a carrot or other bait) encourages deep flexion of the horse's mid- and upper neck.

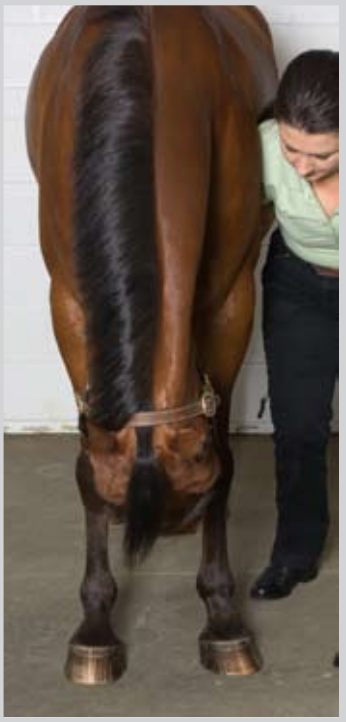
- Stand at the horse's shoulder, facing forward, and holding the carrot in the hand closest to the animal.
- Hold the carrot in front of the chest, encouraging him to bring his chin toward his chest, and hold the rounded position for a few seconds.

As the horse becomes more flexible, encourage him to bring his chin closer to his chest or underside of the neck to increase the degree of flexion in the mid- to upper neck.

2 Chin-to-Fetlock Stretch This stretch encourages deep flexion in the horse's lower neck, Clayton explains. It's important during this exercise to ensure the horse's forelimbs are placed far enough apart to allow his head to pass through them.

- Stand at the horse's girth, facing forward and holding a carrot in the hand closest to the animal.
- Pass the carrot between the horse's forelimbs and entice the horse to lower his chin toward his fetlocks, encouraging him to bring his chin down between his forelimbs, and hold the position for a few seconds.

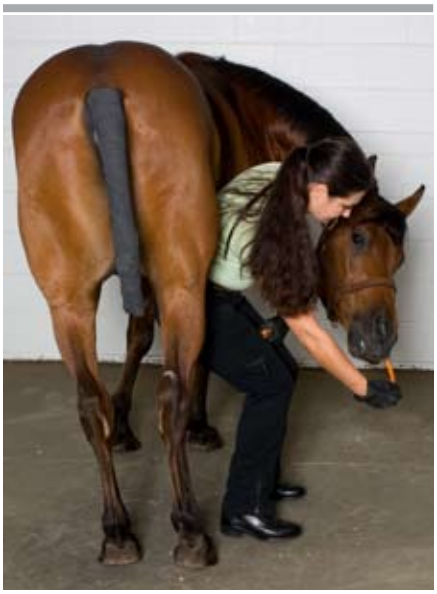
As the horse becomes more comfortable with the exercise, encourage him to bring his muzzle further between his legs by moving the carrot back toward his hind limbs.



Tip: *When performing these exercises, try to keep the horse's head and neck straight, rather than bent to one side. If necessary, have a helper stand in front of the horse and hold the halter noseband to keep his head straight.*

3 Chin-to-Hind Fetlock Stretch Clayton says that this carrot stretch stimulates maximal lateral bending of the neck and thoracolumbar (in front of the pelvis) spine and helps activate the abdominal and pelvic stabilizer muscles.

- Stand about three feet away from the horse's hindquarters, facing forward, and holding the carrot in the hand away from his side.
- Hold the carrot about two feet away from the horse's side, entice his chin to reach as far back and down as possible.



The horse should develop an increased range of motion over time as flexibility improves, so keep encouraging him to stretch further down and back.

Clayton also teaches her horses to do this stretch while standing on three legs. "That takes a while to teach and maybe a little bit more skill, but it really strengthens the stability muscles on the outside hind leg," she says. "First I teach them to do the stretch, and then I teach them to pick up a hind leg with just a tap from the whip. Then I change that to a verbal command; I'll say 'foot' or 'lift.' "

Once the horse has mastered the two skills separately, Clayton puts them together.

"Once I've got their focus on the carrot but before they've turned too far, I'll ask them to lift the inside hind leg," she explains. "They'll only be able to lift a little bit at first and they won't be able to turn very far standing on three legs, but gradually—two or three months to get this down—they'll be able to do it well. Eventually they'll be able to stand on three legs and turn all the way back.

"You can just see them using all those muscles to turn, and also to stabilize the pelvis, which is really important for being able to balance in movements like a pirouette or spin, and to transmit propulsion forward from the hind limbs."

4 Sternal, Wither, and Thoracic Lift Essential to activating a horse's core is activating the abdominal muscles and the thoracic sling muscles, which are responsible for adjusting the position of the sternum (breastbone), ribcage, and withers when the forelimbs are on the ground. Clayton recommends this exercise to teach the horse to round through the base of the neck and raise the withers.

- Stand just behind the horse's elbow, facing the animal.
- Apply upward pressure to the horse's sternum and gradually slide the pressure back to just behind where the girth would sit. The horse will lift his sternum, withers, and thoracic (saddle) area.

Each horse reacts to a different amount of pressure when performing this exercise, so start with mild pressure and increase it slowly until the horse responds. This lift can also be stimulated by scratching under the girth area.

5 Lumbar and Lumbosacral Lift Clayton says this exercise encourages the horse to lift his lumbar and lumbosacral (pelvis) joints and stimulates the abdominal. sublumbar (under the pelvis), and back muscles, which all play a role in allowing the hind feet to come under the horse while working.

- Stand on the side of the horse, facing his flank.
- Starting at the tailhead and working up the spine, apply pressure to successive vertebral spines until you find a "sweet spot" where the horse begins to round his haunches and lift the lumbar spine and pelvis.
- Hold the pressure for a few seconds, then release and watch the horse return to a resting position.

Clayton adds, "You can also do that one by running your thumbnails down the groove (poverty line) between the biceps femoris and semitendinosus muscles (located at the back of the haunches), but I hate to have people standing straight behind the horse." She suggests that if a horse does not respond to the first technique, try stroking the groove on one side at a time from the side of the horse as described above.

Tip: *Both exercises 4 and 5 require constant pressure with a firm object. If you find your fingers aren't quite strong enough to apply the necessary pressure consistently, use a blunt object such as a thimble or the rounded end of a hoof pick or mane comb.*