

Ensure Your Horse is Fit



Whether you have a new horse or a horse that is returning to work after time off, a well thought out fitness program is a must to help reduce the chance of training injuries. For example, a horse that loses strength and muscle tone over a harsh winter requires a plan to get back in shape for summer competitions or trail rides. Also consider your horse's conformation. How your horse's body is built determines what jobs he will or will not be suitable for; and how well he will be able to complete those jobs. Here are some helpful tips to ensure your noble steed reaches the desired level of fitness and muscle tone in order to stay sound.

Overall Health Check

"It is always good practice to have a vet perform an overall health check to ensure there is no lingering lameness that can cause problems for a horse when training them hard," says Gayle Ecker, director at Equine Guelph. The main priority is to ensure the horse is in peak health condition. Knowing your horses' normal heart rate, temperature and breathing rate before you begin a training program is important. A work back plan falls into place once you have an understanding of your horses' current fitness level and set an end goal.

The Horse Health Check

Eyes bright, clear glassy fixed stare, sunken eye	Wounds/Saddle/Girth no visible marks heat/swelling/tenderness pain/raw/bleeding	Muscles/Back relaxed tight or tender very tight and tender
Capillary Refill 0-1 seconds 2-3 seconds 4+ seconds	Jugular Refill 1-2 seconds 2-3 seconds 4+ seconds	Gut Sounds normal sounds reduced/increased absent or abnormal sounds
Mucous Membranes pink, moist pale, tacky dry, purple, blue	Skin Pinch 0-1.5 seconds 2-3 seconds 4+ seconds	Rectal Temperature <38.0°C pre-ride <39.0°C during ride 39.5-40.4°C during ride >40.5°C
	Heart Rate (after strenuous exercise) <68 in 10 minutes 68 in 10-30 minutes >68 in 30 minutes	Anal Tone tight slight loose anus/penis relaxed
		Respiratory Rate relaxed/regular panting/irregular laboured/abnormal

Learn your horse's normal temperature, pulse and respiration and more by downloading the Horse Health Check at:
EquineGuelph.ca/education/healthcare.php

Legs which x-ray and ultrasound clean, are desirable for every horse. This often occurs at the same time as a pre-purchase exam if your vet makes the recommendation. Both, you and your trainer, should agree that the horse is suitable for the tasks you have in mind. There are often special fitness considerations depending on the time of year. Winter often coincides with poor turn-out conditions and (if you do not have the luxury of an indoor arena) less than ideal surfaces to ride on. Riding on poor footing can cause strain on muscles and tendons. Many horses are given more time off in the winter and will lose some muscle tone.

A routine vaccination and deworming program is very important. Horses carrying a worm burden may suffer health issues and won't be able to perform at their peak. "Parasites rob the horse of important energy that should be used for athletic performance," says Ecker. "As for vaccinations, athletic horses are trailered far and wide and often come in contact with many other horses from all regions." Your horse should be wormed regularly 5 times a year using products prescribed by your vet. Taking care of routine details are simple steps to ensure your horse is ready to start training.

Horse's Diet

The amount of food a horse requires will depend on several factors such as workload, size and temperament. If your horse has had the winter off and you are preparing for an

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increase in exercise intensity, it is possible food intake will need adjusting. Your horse's diet should be altered according to its body condition. If he is overweight then increasing his food intake is NOT ideal. However, it is important to make sure your horse is receiving proper nutrition from hay and grain to prepare for physical activity. Electrolytes are

important to add to your horses feed in the summer to replace nutrients lost in sweat. When horses sweat profusely large amounts of water and electrolytes are lost. Extra electrolytes relative to sweat losses are an important part of an optimal diet. It is ideal to consult with a nutrition specialist, who can assess a horse's diet before training begins. Energy, vitamins and minerals may need to be increased in a working horse. When a horse eats dirt, bark or feces, it can be an indication they are lacking an appropriate level of minerals.

Getting in Shape

Is your horse fit enough for the job you are intending? Your horse should not be under, or overweight when preparing for competition or a heavier work routine. You shouldn't be able to see the ribs when looking at your horse but if you run your hand across the barrel you should easily feel them. A horse kept outside all winter, eating only hay, may have lost weight and muscle tone. In this instance an increase in calorie intake will be required when starting back to work. This is where a body condition scoring chart comes in handy. "The optimal score for your horse is a four to five," said Ecker. "Having your horse at this weight and fitness helps to prevent excessive damage to the legs, which can occur when carrying too much fat." Keeping your horse at this score helps to maintain mobility, range of motion and muscle development. Multiple body condition scoring charts have been produced, and the descriptions of the levels are different. This article refers to the Henneke scale of 1-9. Ideally, you want your horse to have a smooth appearance to the skeletal structure with the ribs and pelvis covered.

Training History

How you begin your horse's fitness regime is determined by his training history. A gradual introduction back to work is recommended for horses that have had time off. This may mean starting with 20 minutes of walking as the initial routine for a few weeks. "A horse with little or no previous fitness should be brought back to work slower, and the owner or rider should pay more attention to lameness caused by overwork," says Ecker. If your horse falls into the category of having time off then you should tailor the duration and intensity of exercise to his current fitness level. Start back slowly and increase your horse's work out progressively each day as he gets back into shape. This will be based on his sweat levels during the work out, and ability to bring respiratory and heart rates back down to normal when at rest. A horse with previous conditioning will gain fitness faster.

To learn more about Equine Guelph's exercise physiology course go to http://www.equineguelph.ca/education/individ_courses.php