

## Equine Stretching - Important Thoughts and Considerations -

- Remember that the inborn survival mechanism for horses is the fright and flight response. Horses may be alarmed by external sources while you are working on them. This might include noises, sudden movements by another animal or person, etc. They also may be worried that they do not understand what you are asking as you commence the stretch. At the same time, remember that ninety plus percent of the horses are wonderful to work with. They appreciate your work and cooperate wonderfully.
- Don't have items around in which you or the horse could become tangled or trapped, should the horse shy or panic. Always be aware of your best escape route.
- Do be sure that the handler is aware and in the best position to protect your well being as well as his or her well being.
- Remember *to breathe and stay relaxed*.
- Be very wary of working in cross-ties or with horses who are tied to anything. Better to have the horse "in hand".
- Do pay close attention to your own body mechanics. It is easy to strain or otherwise injure yourself while stretching the horse.
- Do not support the horse's weight or even one leg with your muscles. Assume a posture that allows you to use your skeletal system to balance yourself and support any necessary weight from the patient.
- Let the horse tell you what feels good and what does not. Act only according to what that patient tells you is OK. However, recognize that the stretch that the horse likes the least might be the one he needs the most.
- Relax the body part you are going to stretch, e.g, do small circular releasing movements. If the horse resists and tries to pull the limb away, be a "willow" and go with the movement.
- Move the part of the body being stretched only to the point of resistance. Never force the stretch. Let him release the muscles to accomplish the stretch rather than you fighting the muscles.
- Do a very slow release of the stretch. The release is every bit as important and therapeutic as the stretch itself. It helps to slowly exhale as you do the release.
- The whole point of stretching is to lengthen the muscles. Only a relaxed muscle can stretch to its full length. A muscle that is asked for more stretch than it is willing or ready to accommodate, or that is suddenly released, reacts by contracting.
- Realize that if too much stretch is demanded, the horse will either pull the limb or other body part, or he will try to push rapidly through the movement. Sometimes other muscle parts will contract or spasm.
- With resistant tissue, progress slowly with regard to the number of repetitions used. Initially, three repetitions should be maximum. Rome was not built in a day! It may require one or two weeks for a horse to be able to do a particular stretch. Hold the stretch only as long as the horse is comfortable. Eventually, it would be desirable to be able to hold it for 60 seconds.
- Be careful where your hands are placed. Do not unconsciously squeeze on tendons or ligaments while you perform the stretch. The supporting hand must be passive.

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- If stretches can't be done before and after exercise, choose the "before" exercise route.
- If continued resistance is encountered, the horse may be telling you that he needs massage, acupuncture, chiropractic or a combination of physical therapy modalities.
- Stretches improperly performed at best are ineffectual and at worst, can harm the horse. Well and consistently performed, they can work miracles for soundness and performance.