



Routine exercise is very important for you and your horse. General exercise and mental stimulation helps to keep you and your horse fit and happy. A combination of schooling, riding out, jumping and going to shows will keep your horse active and mentally interested in what he is being asked to do.

Why do I need to exercise my horse?

If you have bought a horse that you can ride and you want to have fun together, there are a number of elements that will maintain your horse's health, fitness and interest in the job at hand. Regular exercise is one of the elements, along with a healthy diet and routine health care, eg worming, dental care, foot care. Exercising your horse is essential for all aspects of its general fitness, including co-ordination, balance, suppleness, engagement of hindquarters and strength, as well as obedience. These can all be maintained with the use of a routine exercise programme.

What sort of exercise should I consider?

Exercising your horse can involve all sorts of different exercises and activities. Exercising shouldn't, and doesn't need to, involve endless schooling around an arena day after day. Horses can get bored very quickly, so it is important to vary the type of work you do with your horse on a regular basis to keep him interested in his work.

Schooling

Basic schooling is essential for maintaining suppleness, balance and obedience, this may include working on elements such as bending exercises, riding circles and lateral work, as well as concentrating on perfecting transitions and maintaining control. Schooling can be done anywhere (depending on weather and ground conditions), but it may help your horse's concentration if you school in a designated area, eg an arena (outdoor or indoor) or a specially marked out area in a field. Schooling is beneficial to the rider as well as the horse; it encourages the rider to develop a balanced position and secure, light seat with gentle hands for a good "contact".

"Contact" is the feeling of togetherness through your hands to the horse's mouth and through your upper body to the horse's back; this is determined by the stage to which your horse is trained and your horse's ability to work through the back and hindquarters. You will know when you have established a good "contact" when you feel the reins soften as your horse arches its neck in front of you and rises its back under you, you will also notice that your horse will use its hindquarters to propel itself forward, rather than pulling forward from the forehead. Once you have established a good "contact" with your horse you will be able to work together to improve on all aspects of your horse's fitness.

Schooling exercises should include:

- Transitions (change of pace): for example from walk to trot (upward transition) or canter to trot (downward transition), the basis of all schooling. Transitions require obedience, co-ordination, balance and engagement of the hindquarters.
- Bending: using circles, figure-of-8 movements, etc; these should be done on both reins (left and right) to maintain even suppleness and balance on both reins.
- Lateral work: such as leg yield or turn on the forehead. Lateral work is like gymnastics; horses are initially taught the various exercises from the ground, but once established, it improves and maintains suppleness, obedience, strength and engagement of the hindlimbs.
- Techniques for specific disciplines: depending on your chosen discipline, eg dressage, jumping, endurance riding, etc, you will need to practice specific techniques to perfect your chosen discipline. For example in dressage, emphasis is on perfecting transitions and lateral work, whereas in endurance riding, emphasis is on developing stamina.

Riding out (hacking)

If your horse is safe on the road then riding out is another way of getting exercise. Riding out introduces variety and is a relaxing way of spending time with your horse, both of which are essential elements for a fit and happy horse and rider partnership. While riding out, you and your horse can enjoy a change of scenery by exploring bridleways and byways across the country. However, be careful not to undo the hard work you put in during schooling, it's all too easy to undo good schooling work with a haphazard attitude to riding out.

Exercise - keeping your horse fit and happy



Although it is nice to relax and not feel the pressures of schooling, when riding out it is still important to practice and maintain your riding basics, ie good position, contact and other schooling exercises such as bending, transitions and lateral work. This will ensure your horse continues to use the correct muscles in his back, and you can avoid issues that can be caused by working for long sessions in an incorrect position. It will also ensure that your horse is attentive and responsive to all your aids in any type of situation. If you can achieve all your schooling basics in strange surroundings then taking your horse out to a show for example should be no problem at all.

Remember. When riding out you should be aware of the potential dangers, so ensure you are familiar with the Highway Code for horses; it is also advisable to carry a mobile phone in case of an emergency and for both you and your horse to wear reflective clothing so other people and vehicles can see you approaching.

Lungeing

When lungeing a horse, the handler should stand in the middle of an imaginary circle (between 5-10 metres radius), with the horse working on the circumference of the circle from a lunge rein attached to a lunge cavesson. Voice commands should be used but these can be backed up with a lunge whip where necessary. Lungeing is an important part of a horse's exercise programme - it can help to:

- Strengthen your horse's back muscles and tone the horse's outline
- Improve a horse's way of going, co-ordination and balance without the weight and interference of a rider
- Stretch and loosen the horse's body
- Get a horse to engage his hindquarters
- Improve lateral flexibility
- Cool down or warm up a tense horse

Your horse should always be lunged by an experienced person, as if done incorrectly, can be ineffective and dangerous.

Long reining

This is a good alternative to lungeing, but does require a lot more skill. Two lunge reins are attached to either side of the bit or lungeing cavesson, these are held against the horse's side by the stirrups or a roller. The handler walks closely behind or alongside the quarters of the horse and the reins are used to ask for correct flexion and are kept in contact with the horse's sides to simulate leg aids. Long reining simulates ridden work and allows for more control and precision than lungeing.

Long reining should also only be undertaken by an experienced person.

Jumping

Before attempting to jump, your horse must be reasonably fit and well schooled on the flat. If your horse is trained to jump, it can be used to maintain variety in their exercise programme. Your chosen discipline may not be jumping, and you may not be ready for "Burghley", but being able to jump a little log or a small cross-pole will keep your horse thinking, which will ensure a positive mental attitude to all the other activities in which you and your horse are involved.

Working over ground poles and grids of jumps is a useful way to improve your horse's strength, suppleness and obedience, and your own concentration and accuracy as a rider. Lungeing over ground poles and jumps are other useful exercises. Using ground poles is also a good way of introducing an inexperienced horse to jumping.

How much should I exercise my horse?

Every exercise programme is different for each individual horse. It will depend on breed, age, discipline, etc, therefore no one programme is suitable for all horses!

For an unfit horse, a basic fitness programme should be planned over a period of six to eight weeks or so, starting with short slow sessions, working up to longer faster periods of work. Each week the length and intensity of the work should increase to improve strength and fitness, but remember to incorporate rest days into the timetable too. A basic fitness programme of gentle exercise will burn off excess fat, tone up muscles, strengthen joints, tendons and ligaments, in preparation for a more intensive exercise programme. The periods of faster work towards the end of the fitness programme will strengthen the heart



and lungs.

You can check how well your horse is coping with the fitness programme by monitoring heart rate and how quickly it recovers to a normal rate after exercise. Approximate heart rates:

- Rest: 38-42 bpm
- Walk: 60-80 bpm
- Trot: 120-140 bpm
- Canter: 160-200 bpm
- Gallop: 210-230 bpm

After each session of training you should time how long it takes before your horse's heart rate returns to a normal rest rate. The fitter your horse gets, the more rapidly it should recover. As a general rule, if your horse does not recover to the required rate after a ten-minute rest period, then the exercise is too hard for its stage of fitness and should be reduced.

If your horse is already at a basic level of fitness then you can move straight on to a more intensive programme, including technique training, this will fine-tune the specific muscles required for the discipline(s) your horse will be undertaking, eg jumping or dressage. Even if you are not intending to compete with your horse, you will still need to maintain a routine exercise programme based on the level of fitness your horse needs to maintain. For example, a "happy hacker" will be able to maintain adequate fitness by being schooled and ridden out just a few days a week, whereas a more competitive Pony Club horse taking part in regular competitions, will need a more intensive exercise programme to maintain an higher level of fitness.

What else do I need to know?

Top Tips.

- Always remember to warm up your horse before strenuous exercise - this is essential for optimum performance and will help reduce muscular injury; the same goes for cooling down after exercise; if your horse is sweaty after exercise, remember to use a sweat rug in the winter-time so it doesn't catch a chill, or give your horse a nice cool wash to cool him down in the summer-time.
- Introduce stretches - after a light warm-up introduce some stretching exercise to keep your horse supple, this can be done under saddle or from the ground; this will help to further warm up the muscles and again reduce muscular injury.
- Maintain a routine - once your horse is fit, that specific level of fitness should be maintained by implementing a regular routine of exercise based on that fitness level. This is very important, not only for fitness, but for general well-being, especially if your horse is stabled for long periods of time.
- If you encounter any unusual behavioural problems when exercising your horse, such as bucking or rearing, make sure you investigate all probable causes for the behaviour, eg poorly fitting tack, musculoskeletal pain, etc, before attempting to resolve the issue with further training.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.