

YOUR HORSE Open Clinic + Q&A

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

You sent us your questions on keeping horses healthy and our experts are here to share their advice on everything from recovery from injury to helping Cushing's patients thrive

What exercises will help kissing spines recovery?

Q My horse has kissing spines affecting three vertebrae in the saddle area. She's had injections and laser treatment, and will be on field rest for two months before gradually coming back into work. Can you advise any exercises that will help her recover?

Vicky Taylor, Staffordshire



Physiotherapist Rachel Greetham says:

▲ To optimise recovery you need to improve your mare's core stability, strengthen her topline and encourage her to engage her hindquarters.

I recommend an assessment from your chartered physiotherapist after your horse's field rest so the physio can give specific and tailored exercises for her needs. The physio will treat any pain or muscle spasms to enable the muscles to function correctly so they can strengthen and support the spine.

The following exercises, done at the



Walk work is great for bringing a horse back into ridden work

appropriate time, will aid recovery: baited stretches to improve core stability and flexibility, lunging to encourage the correct way of going, long-lining, hill work in-hand, pole work in-hand, on long lines or the lunge (especially in walk, in straight lines and circles progressing to raised poles), rein-back in-hand, and turning in a small circle in-hand for spinal flexion

and hind limb crossing.

Your physio could also demonstrate pelvic rounding exercises and abdominal lifts, but I'd only advise exercises such as these under guidance.

When ridden work is appropriate, schooling long and low will encourage her to use her back, but make sure a master saddler checks your saddle fit beforehand.

How can massage help my horse?

Q My horse is 12, in light work and we do the occasional local competitions. Would massage help his overall wellbeing?

Claire Short, Derbyshire



Massage therapist Eleanor Frost says:

▲ Massage therapy is generally advocated as an effective method for the maintenance of the equine athlete, whatever level of work or discipline. It uses numerous techniques that can influence structures including muscle, blood vessels, connective tissues and more.

Massage is suggested to assist a horse's range of motion, stride length and physiologic stress responses. Evidence points towards treatments relaxing muscle spasm and tension, improving muscle tone, reducing

congestion to blood and lymph vessels, encouraging tissue repair, plus it stretches connective tissue, maintains flexibility, prevents formation of adhesions in muscles, tendons and ligaments, and improves overall relaxation and wellbeing.

Massage is best performed by a qualified professional therapist who can assess your horse's musculature and devise a routine for you to follow, which may also incorporate stretches and ground work exercises.

The most basic form of massage is a vigorous grooming regime, which is something that's easy to build into your routine. There are also some basic techniques that you can use on a regular basis - watch my video guide by using the link or scanning the QR code (right). Massage improves your bond with your horse and you'll become more intuitive with your feel as you develop.



WATCH IT ONLINE

Watch Eleanor's video advice for equine massage at www.yourhorse.co.uk/



Grooming is an everyday activity that, when done vigorously, also has massage benefits

MEET THE EXPERTS



Sally Hodgson is an equine vet at Hook Norton Veterinary Group, a member of XLEquine



Rachel Greetham is a chartered animal physiotherapist who treats the British FEI event teams



Eleanor Frost is a qualified massage therapist with a BSc (Hons) in Equine Science



David Buckton is associate director at equine insurance experts South Essex Insurance Brokers



Julianne Aston is the founder of the Veteran Horse Society, with 35 years spent caring for older horses



Colin Mitchell is a vet and partner at Scott Mitchell Associates, a member of XLEquine vet group

How can I help my mare regain her strength?

Q My mare fell in the field nine months ago and her performance gradually deteriorated. She was examined and treated by the vet but wasn't happy coming back into work. A second opinion then indicated she'd damaged her stifle, so she had surgery and is now ready to come back into work. What can I do to help her gain strength in the right areas?

Elizabeth Dollimore, via Facebook



Vet expert Sally Hodgson says:

▲ After such a long time off work your mare will need a long period of rehabilitation to return to her previous level of athleticism. I assume she's had a period of box rest, followed by walking in-hand from the box before being turned out. The exact advice will vary depending on the findings at surgery and the exact nature of the injury, but my advice would be to do four weeks walking under saddle, starting with hacking out and using a variety of surfaces. Over the following two weeks I'd introduce a few short spells of trot work (30-60 seconds at first, increasing by 30-60 seconds each day). Different surfaces send different 'feedback signals' up through the limb to the spinal cord, so we vary the surface to retrain the reflexes that help the horse cope with different ground conditions.

After six weeks ask your vet to recommend an Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in

Animal Therapy physiotherapist to treat any tightness before reintroducing canter work. This will help your mare use herself properly. The physiotherapist may recommend groundwork exercises such as walking over poles or lunging to help develop muscle and coordination. You'll also need to get her saddle fit checked. This may seem drawn-out but it's essential you allow time for your mare to re-adapt and build strength. These are general guidelines and may not be appropriate for all cases so it's important that you liaise with your vet as closely as possible.



Gentle hacking is a good starting point for returning to work

Need our help?

Email us your horse care questions to getinvolved@yourhorse.co.uk and we'll find the right expert to help - it's all part of our Open Clinic service! To share your horse care tips and advice with other readers, visit our Open Clinic page at www.yourhorse.co.uk/forum

What should I use for cleaning out wounds?

Q What's the best thing to clean a wound - has salt water gone out of fashion? Also, what is safe or helpful to put on a wound and why? And is there anything you shouldn't put on a wound?

Kath Russell, County Durham



Vet Colin Mitchell says:

▲ Salt water is less fashionable now because unless the amount of salt is exactly measured out to the volume of water, more harm than good can result.

Most vets sell bags of isotonic solutions for precisely this reason - no mixing is required so you can just flush the wound with the solution. Ask your vet for a bag of Hartmanns Solution, Isolec or sterile saline.

Alternatively, contact lens solutions can be used, and if all else fails, plain water is fine - it's the flushing action that's important. Clean water from a cooled kettle is ideal. To protect the delicate structures within a wound, avoid wound powders and strong skin detergents such as iodine.

Ask our expert

Join Eleanor Frost for a live web chat on Monday, 19 January, from 8-9pm where she'll answer all your equine massage therapy questions. Visit www.yourhorse.co.uk/openclinic for details.



I'm worried about my pony's pot belly and lethargy - could it be Cushing's?

Q My pony has seemed very down in himself for a while, and has a huge dropped pot belly that exercise doesn't seem to shift. We regularly carry out worm counts so I know it's not worms, but he wees a lot and I'm worried about equine metabolic syndrome and Cushing's. Can you help?

Clare Durst, Shropshire



Vet Sally Hodgson says:

A I think you're quite right to be thinking about Cushing's syndrome! The lethargy, pot belly and excessive urination are all very common symptoms. Take a look online at www.talkaboutlaminitis.co.uk for more information about Cushing's, and get your vet to see him. If testing shows he does have Cushing's, it can be treated with a daily tablet to help with his symptoms. Cushing's also predisposes horses to develop laminitis - with this prevention is always better than cure! There is some recent evidence to show that treating Cushing's can slow the progression of laminitis. I've seen some remarkable transformations, so get in touch with your vet and get pro-active!



If your Cushing's patient is well, his management plan is working

Can you help me keep my Cushing's veteran healthy?

Q I have a 24-year-old Welsh Section D x Thoroughbred who's being treated for Cushing's disease. He's happy, eating well and bright-eyed but I'd like advice on how to keep him as well as possible going forward into spring.

Alison Quigley, Yorkshire



Veteran expert Julianne Aston says:

A I get asked this a lot and while there are many different management plans for Cushing's, if your boy is looking and eating well I'd say continue on his management plan. If he drops weight, you may need to consider introducing a weight-gaining feed. We try to keep our

Cushing's ponies on a herbal medication, but I appreciate people use chemical drugs to balance the hormones and body chemicals. After years of working with Cushing's patients, I think if your veteran's teeth are a little worn and not working 100%, this actually works in their favour as you have much more control over their diet, plus in my experience grass and high-protein veteran feeds do seem to encourage laminitis a lot quicker.

It's very difficult to give a full feed or management plan for individual horses without speaking to the owner, as every horse is individual and careful planning is needed. Anyone who'd like a chat about their veteran's situation can call the Veteran Horse Society on 01239 881300 or 07789 514004.

How can I support his rehabilitation?

Q My four-year-old sports horse has a malformed sacrum, and is having steroid injections to reduce inflammation and soreness. What rehab and exercises should I do before I can continue backing him?

Karen Coleman, Cornwall



Physiotherapist Rachel Greetham says:

A Following consultation with your vet, your chartered physiotherapist will conduct an assessment, specifically associated to the sacroiliac joint. They'll consider muscle tension, spinal mobility, hind limb range of movement, muscle development, gait and core stability.

It's important the area is pain free and the muscles are functioning correctly before you restart your horse's rehab and backing process. Your veterinary and physiotherapy management will enable this to happen.

Exercises you can start in the stable are baited stretches and weight transference exercises to encourage hind limb stabilization. Walking in-hand you can do halt-walk transitions, gentle hill work and walking over poles, progressing to raised poles, then long-lining in straight lines.

Once he's ready you can start walking him in-hand with an elastic theraband fitted loosely round his hindquarters and attached to a roller to provide resistance and encourage better hind limb engagement. When appropriate lunging can be started. This will help his recovery but take it slowly.



Working in-hand and practising walk-halt transitions will help your horse build strength

Why does he get stage fright?

Q This may sound a bit silly, but my horse has recently become very reluctant to wee in public. He'll always go as soon as he's home and back out in the field, but if at a show or around others he'll suddenly become very sluggish and keep stopping, but not actually go. On the rare occasion he does,

he's then fine and back to normal. His wee looks and smells normal, and when in the field he has no problem at all. Do you think this is just the way he is or could there be an underlying problem?

Jane Dixon, via YH forum



Vet Colin Mitchell says:

A It might just be the way your horse is, but it is probably worth checking whether or not there's an underlying problem. If he will only urinate normally when there is no rider on his back he may have some back pain.

If drops his penis from his sheath but doesn't pass urine, despite multiple attempts, he may have a small pea-sized chunk of smegma at the end of his penis, which is making him uncomfortable. Your vet can easily remove this under sedation.

Less common are urinary bladder problems such as stones or 'sludge-like' material in the bladder. Kidney disease is quite rare in the horse.

If he will happily urinate when you're riding him out on a hack on your own then it may just be that he's a sensitive individual!

Some horses prefer to urinate in familiar surroundings



Massage can be a powerful tool for helping relieve muscular stiffness



Can I use massage to relieve his stiffness?

Q My horse was out of work for a while after an abscess. He seems slightly stiff behind, is there anything you'd suggest I do to help this before I start bringing him back into work?

Julie Marks, Cambridgeshire



Massage therapist Eleanor Frost says:

A As with any muscular condition, referral to a qualified equine sports massage therapist or other body worker is recommended, but there are things you can do to help your horse before you start any ridden or fitness work. Standing next to him, either on the ground or on a stool, I'd start with some long gliding strokes over the back, using both hands to apply gentle but increasing pressure, following the lie of his coat.

Lead the strokes into his hindquarters, then switch to using the heel of your palm or a loose fist to apply rhythmic, pumping strokes with one or both hands on the gluteal muscles. Intersperse these shorter compression strokes with long sweeping

pressure strokes every 20 seconds or so to assist in lymph and toxin removal. As tissues begin to soften, you may identify rigid or 'lumpy' areas that can be treated using direct pressure using a thumb, finger or elbow - start with lighter pressure and hold for up to a minute, gauging how he responds. Follow with long, sweeping strokes to remove toxins.

Next, using a loose fist and imitating the rhythmic pounding of a drum (keeping a relaxed wrist) will help stimulate and enhance muscle tone, which has a relaxing effect when you alter the pressure or rhythm. Again, follow with several long, gliding moves.

Stretching also has a place in a rehabilitation routine, so after a warm up, pick up his hind leg from behind the fetlock and draw it gently forwards for up to 10 seconds to stretch the gluteals and hamstrings. Finally, daily walking over raised poles (in-hand or ridden) will help engage his core, leading to a lift in the back musculature and improving his range of movement and suppleness through the shoulder, stifle and hocks.