

These exercises are simple to perform and involve very little in expensive equipment. Indeed, Gail has specifically designed this programme so that anyone, on any budget, can afford to build optimum foundations for their horse. You do not need a riding arena, just a few poles. However, there is no substitute for taking advice from your local ASSVAP veterinary physiotherapist and getting some individual input for your horse's particular problems. Some of the first and most important exercises you can do involve stretching the muscles within your horse's neck, shoulder, back and hip. You will never see a human athlete competing without first having a good stretch of their muscles. Stretching muscles has many effects but the main benefits are lengthening of fibres and increasing blood flow. There still remains controversy within the sports-science literature as to whether passive or dynamic stretching is the most efficacious. Passive (static) stretching involves reaching to a point of tension within the muscle(s) and holding the stretch. Passive stretching has been used throughout the years for two main reasons: injury prevention and performance enhancement. But there is now some evidence in the human sports-science literature that passive stretching is not recommended for athletes whose sport involves quick changes of direction. Dynamic stretching involves moving parts of the body and gradually increasing reach or speed of movement, or both. Whilst there is confusion in the human literature and little or no evidence in the equine literature as to the efficacy of stretching techniques, we will include both passive and dynamic stretching exercises within this chapter. However, Gail's experience in rehabilitating hundreds of horses leads her to believe that in a rehabilitation programme, dynamic stretching should be included in the programme, and passive stretching should be applied at the end of the exercise session. In fact this will generally apply to all horses, whatever their ability, training and athleticism.

Passive stretching

Passive stretches with your horse are generally simple to undertake as long as you remember the golden rules.

1. Ensure that the environment in which you intend to carry out the stretches is safe for both you and your horse. Particularly, do not stretch with the horse standing on concrete or any slippery surface. Always make sure that your horse is standing as square as possible.
2. Do not perform passive stretches with your horse tied up. Ask a friend to hold him for you whilst you do it.
3. Always make sure that there is enough room around the horse for you to be safe. Getting trapped in the back corner of the stable stretching a hind limb is very dangerous.
4. Once your horse has accepted passive stretches as part of his daily routine, you will find that he enjoys them, but do take care for the first few times and always make your movements slow and careful, because this will be new to him.
5. Make sure you don't injure your back, always try to keep your back straight.

6. For young horses, or those recovering from injury, hold the stretch for about 15–20 seconds. For athletic conditioning, hold for about 30–40 seconds.

7. Do not stretch further than the 'end feel', i.e. at the point where there is a resistance to your stretch.

Shoulder and forelimb stretches

Generally individual stretches should be carried out on one limb and then the same stretch on the other limb. For example, you would do the shoulder protraction stretch on the right forelimb and then do the protraction stretch on the left forelimb. In this way you can make an assessment of any differences between the two. For example, is your horse able to stretch the left limb more easily than the right, etc? If you also make notes of your findings, you will then have a record of your horse's progress.

Protraction stretch

Pick up the forefoot, and place both hands around the back of the fetlock or pastern. Draw the limb forwards keeping the height of the hoof of the limb being stretched at about the height of the knee on the other forelimb. Hold for 15–20 seconds and then replace the foot on the ground either in line with the other forefoot or by just lowering the foot to the ground from the stretch. This will leave the foot in a position in advance of the other forefoot and will allow the horse to continue the stretch himself should he wish to.

Contraindications to any stretches are muscle damage to any of the muscles which would be stretched. Also be careful if the horse had known knee-joint problems. However, you can still do the shoulder stretch but by stretching with your hands placed behind and slightly above the knee joint.

Retraction stretch

Stand at the side of the horse, facing the limb you wish to stretch. Pick up the foot supporting the pastern with one hand, and place your other hand at the front of the knee. Taking care to keep your back straight, take a step towards the rear of the horse. Using only the hand in front of the knee, draw the limb backwards until you reach the end feel. Always make sure that the limb remains level to the body and that you are not pulling it away from his side. After the appropriate time, replace the foot gently back on the ground.

Contraindications to this stretch are as for the previous stretch.