

Equine Carrot Stretches

INCREASING FLEXIBILITY, CORE STRENGTH, & BALANCE

Carrot stretches harness the horse's natural movement to enhance vertebral joint range of motion, build core strength and improve flexibility. Using a carrot, the horse is lured through three different motions including rounding (flexion), hollowing (extension) and side to side (lateral) bending. During each exercise, the horse moves under its own volition to gradually stretch its postural muscles and take each vertebra through a complete range of motion. The horse should never be forced into a position, as this could result in over stretching or injury. Practicing carrots stretches daily will result in enhanced flexibility, core strength, and balance within 2-3 weeks.

Getting Started Safely

It is important to ensure the safety of both the horse and the handler during each exercise. This can be achieved through proper environment and treat selection, correct positioning of the handler during stretches, and the aid of an assistant.

THE ENVIRONMENT

The area chosen should be enclosed with good footing. This could be an arena, large bedded stall, or level paddock. The horse should be allowed to move freely with only a halter. Avoid lead ropes or blankets that may get caught or inhibit the horse's movement.

THE BAIT

Choose a palatable bait that offers ample finger protection such as a carrot or candy cane. Carrots may be cut in half length wise to decrease the total amount needed for each session.

PROPER HANDLER POSITIONING

During all stretches, the handler should stand close to the horse. Care should be taken to remain clear of kick zones. The handler should also identify a clear path to step away if the horse becomes unbalanced.

THE ASSISTANT

An assistant can help stabilize the horse's position (prevent forward movement) and ensure the horse has proper posture during each stretch.

THE HORSE

Carrot stretches are most effective when performed after the horse's normal workout. This is because joint mobility and muscle stretch is enhanced when the horse's body is warm.

Your Horse's Learning Process

Learning to balance, move with control, and hold a stretch is difficult for some horses. The promise of a tasty snack can override focus on the task resulting in a step towards the bait instead of a stretch. Some horses may need to take a step to regain balance as they begin to develop core strength and control. Blocking the horse's path with a wall or the gentle hand of an assistant can discourage unwanted movement.

Supplies

- Bait
- Small pulling comb
- Assistant
- Safe enclosed space with good footing

Indications

- Improve strength and balance
- Enhance range of motion
- Promote suppleness of the neck and back
- Reduce potential for athletic injury
- Rehabilitation of musculoskeletal injury or neurologic disorders as instructed by a veterinarian

Contraindications

- Ataxia or difficulty balancing at rest
- Persistent and consistent pain or difficulty with a specific stretch
- Certain neurologic disorders or musculoskeletal injuries as determined by a veterinarian

Carrot Stretch Anatomy

The horse will target several locations on or near its body while performing carrot stretches (figure 1). Locations farther from the center of gravity (withers) will be of greater difficulty and will be targeted as the horse gains flexibility and familiarity with each stretch.



Proper Positioning of the Horse and Stretch Repetition

Positioning: For each stretch, begin with the horse standing squarely and balanced on level ground.

Repetition: Repeat each stretch 3-5 times. Between stretches, allow a couple seconds for the horse to relax its muscles. For lateral bending stretches, repeat each an even number of times.

Lateral Bending Exercises

The handler should stand near the shoulder facing away from the horse. Use the bait to encourage the horse to stretch around your body toward the girth. The horse should bend fluidly and evenly through the neck with minimal rotation of the head (figure 2). Hold the stretch for 10-15 seconds. This may be difficult for some horses. Slowly increase the length of each stretch as the horse becomes more familiar with the activity. As the horse progresses, extend the stretch from the level of the girth, towards the hip (figure 3) or down towards the hock (figure 4).





Rounding Exercises

BOWING STRETCH

The handler should stand near the horse's girth, facing the same direction as the horse. Use the bait to encourage the horse to stretch down to the level of the knee (carpus) or chest (for greater flexion of the neck). The horse should bend evenly through the neck and back. The head is level and the back is rounded (figures 5 and 6). Hold for 10-15 seconds. As the horse progresses, extend the stretch between the knees (figure 7) or down between the fetlocks (figure 8). Some horses may elevate the heels of their front feet or slightly bend their knees. This is normal.



FIGURE 5

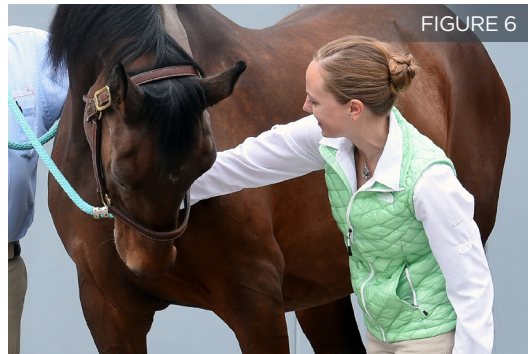


FIGURE 6

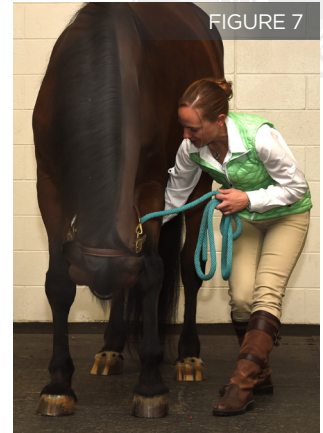


FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8

STERNUM (TRUNK) LIFT

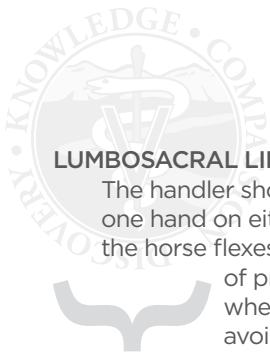
The handler should stand near the elbow, facing the horse. With the fingers or a comb, apply gentle pressure to the sternum at the level of the girth (figure 9). The horse will respond by contracting its abdominal muscles, lifting its sternum, and flexing (arching) its back at the level of the withers (figure 10). Each horse will require a different amount of applied pressure. The first time this activity is performed, it is important to stand clear of all kick zones, as some very sensitive horses may kick at their belly in response to the stimulus. This reaction will disappear as the horse becomes familiar with the activity.



FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10



LUMBOSACRAL LIFT (BUTT TUCK)

The handler should stand near the flank, facing the same direction as the horse. Beginning near the base of the tail, place one hand on either side of the spine (figure 11). Apply gentle pressure. Continue to move cranially (towards the head) until the horse flexes its lumbosacral region (figure 12). As with the previous exercise, each horse will require a different amount of pressure to achieve the desired stretch. It is important to watch for a gradual flexion of the lumbosacral region when applying pressure. If the pressure applied is too strong, the horse may flex violently. This motion should be avoided, as it is not conducive to proper stretching or core strengthening.



FIGURE 11

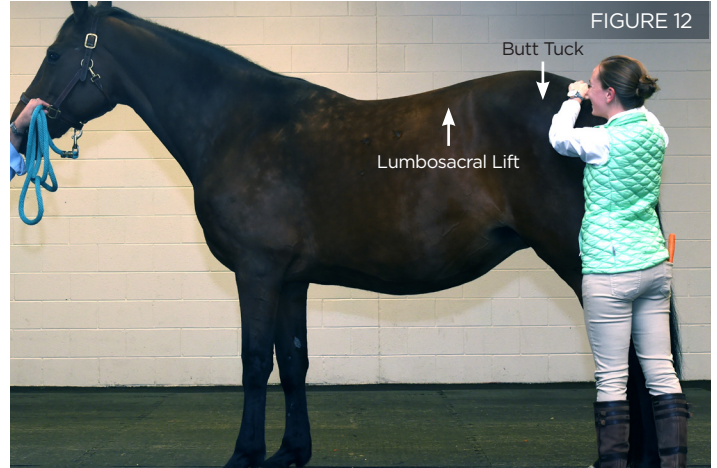


FIGURE 12

Extension Exercises

The handler should stand facing the horse. Use the bait to encourage the horse to extend its neck and stretch in an upward direction (figure 13). Hold for 10-15 seconds.



FIGURE 13

Melissa Maddux, UTCVM Class of 2016