

# PILATES FOR HORSES

stretching exercises to improve core stability



with Gillian Higgins

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Welcome to Part Seven of our exciting new series, Pilates for Horses, in collaboration with Gillian Higgins.

"Pilates is a conditioning system that increases the core stability, strength and body awareness, re-dresses imbalances and re-aligns the body from the inside out," Gillian says. "It can improve posture, achieve a balance between strength and flexibility, and relieve tension. Many principles of pilates can be applied to horses. Core stability and strength are as important to horses as they are to riders. Maintaining stability, posture and balance can contribute to more effective training, improved performance and reduce the risk of injury."

There are two main types of stretching, Gillian explains. 'Passive' stretches are performed by the handler. Your horse needs to feel relaxed and confident to achieve these stretches properly. 'Active' stretches require active muscle contraction from the horse to move body parts and create the stretch himself. Active stretches can be performed during ridden or groundwork exercises and also with food rewards, such as carrots.

The most important thing to remember when stretching your horse or pony is that cold connective tissues which have low blood saturation can be more susceptible to injury. "Therefore, it is absolutely vital that your horse is warm before completing any of these exercises," Gillian says. "Never attempt to stretch cold muscles."

## HOW TO STRETCH

1. Begin slowly. Unless otherwise stated, once the maximum stretch is reached hold it there for 5-15 seconds to allow the muscle fibres to relax before taking the stretch further.
2. Work a manageable programme into your daily routine.
3. Be patient. You will only see the benefits of stretching if you perform the stretches regularly and consistently.

## STRETCHING CAN

Increase stride length, range of movement, engagement, flexibility, athleticism and suppleness. Reduce muscular soreness, tension and stiffness. Reduce the risk of injury to joints, muscles and tendons. Improve coordination. Maintain the current level of flexibility. Increase mental and physical relaxation. Increase circulation. Enhance body awareness.

"Working on the principle that most people will forget or not be able to manage these exercises once or twice a week, I find the best way is to try and fit the exercises into your daily routine rather than trying to set aside a certain amount of time each day," Gillian advises.

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Cold connective tissues which have low blood saturation can be more susceptible to injury. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that your horse is warm. Never attempt to stretch cold muscles.
- If your horse is unsound, for instance your horse has recently sustained an injury, stretching may be inappropriate. Seek professional advice before commencing a stretching program with your horse.
- If in doubt during any of these exercises, seek assurance from your veterinarian and take advice from a therapist. They will assess your horse's musculature and plan a suitable program of stretches. They can also show you how to perform stretches safely without risk to either yourself or your horse.
- All horses may kick or bite if they don't like the exercise. Only perform a stretch if you have confidence in yourself and your horse.

## CARPAL MOBILISATION

### AIM

1. To mobilise the knee joint, creating movement and stimulating joint fluid production.

### HOW TO DO IT

1. Facing your horse's hindquarters, pick up his forelimb and hold, so the lower limb is horizontal.
2. Ensure his leg is relaxed before commencing mobilisations.
3. Whilst keeping the knee still, gently take his hoof to the inside (Image 1) and outside (Image 2) to the point of resistance, so that lateral movement is created within the carpal joint.
4. This movement should be done slowly repeated up to 10 times on each side.
5. Bring the hoof towards the elbow, so the knee joint is fully flexed (Image 3).
6. Hold for 3-4 seconds, then lower.
7. Repeat 2-3 times.

### TIP

Hold the forelimb firmly to give your horse the confidence to relax and allow you to move his leg. Hold the leg above the level of the fetlock joint to encourage your horse to relax. Do not force movement in the joint beyond the point of resistance.

This exercise is good for stretching the carpal extensor muscles. It is also particularly useful for horses on confined box rest. However, consult with your veterinarian first to ensure the exercise will not interfere with any injuries.



## PILATES FOR HORSES

### Horses Inside Out Australian Tour 2014



Gillian Higgins from Horses Inside Out (UK) is coming to Australia in 2014

QLD Dates  
7th - 13th April  
WA Dates  
16th - 19th April

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QLD Contact: Kathy Siggers / 0413 054 182 / [kathy@warrego.com.au](mailto:kathy@warrego.com.au)  
WA Contact: Jessica Blackwell / 0407 850 033 / [info@equestricare.com.au](mailto:info@equestricare.com.au)



## ELBOW STRETCH

### AIM

1. To stretch the muscles which extend the elbow joint in general and the triceps muscle in particular

### HOW TO DO IT

1. Facing your horse's tail, pick up his forelimb.
2. Once he has relaxed, gently and gradually lift his knee until the elbow joint is at an angle of 40-45 degrees. Be careful not to force the knee joint into full flexion.
3. Hold this position for 5-15 seconds. After a few seconds, your horse will relax and the stretch may be increased.
4. It may be helpful to rest the upper part of the cannon bone on your hip bone.
5. Repeat 3-5 times.
6. Next, hold the forearm horizontally and allow the lower limb to rest comfortably, so the knee joint is not in full flexion).
7. Take his knee across his body, so the limb is pointing diagonally inwards, rather than forwards.
8. Hold this position for 3-5 seconds.
9. Repeat 3-5 times.



*I'd love to hear from you!*

Hi, it's Gillian here from Horses Inside Out. I hope you've enjoyed my Pilates for Horses series as much as I've enjoyed working with Horses and People each month. I'd love to hear how you've been using these exercises with your horse! What improvements have you seen?



Go to: [www.facebook.com/horsesinsideout](http://www.facebook.com/horsesinsideout) to leave your comments. I'd love to hear from you!

### TIP

Hold the limb securely to give your horse the confidence to relax and allow you to move his leg.

At all times, keep the lower part of the limb in line with the forearm, so as not to put additional lateral or rotational strain on the carpal joint.

This exercise is good for improving freedom of movement through the elbow and forelimb. It is also a useful stretch for show jumpers and can be used as a general set of mobilisation exercises for a horse on stable rest. However, consult with your veterinarian first to ensure this exercise will not interfere with any injuries.



### TIP

Hold your horse's forelimb firmly to give him the confidence to relax and allow you to move his leg. Hold the leg above the fetlock joint. Holding the fetlock joint in a flexed position may encourage your horse to step forwards, as this position can stimulate a movement pattern.

This exercise is good for stretching the muscles involved in lateral work, young horses to help them develop proprioception, stretching out the muscles to alleviate stiffness, and increasing stride length and freedom of movement within the forelimb and shoulder.

### NEXT MONTH

Don't miss next month's issue of Horses and People Magazine where Gillian will continue this Pilates series with more stretching exercises to help strengthen the core muscles that make for good posture and a strong back.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gillian Higgins, a sports and remedial therapist and event rider based in the UK, works with horses and riders from all disciplines. After realising that many horse owners could benefit from a deeper understanding of how their horse works, Gillian developed Horses Inside Out, an organisation providing insight into equine locomotion, training and management from an anatomical perspective.*

## PECTORAL STRETCH

### AIM

1. To stretch the adductor and thoracic sling muscles on the inside of the forelimb involved in lateral work
2. To stretch the pectoral muscles
3. To improve proprioception and range of movement

### HOW TO DO IT

1. Lift your horse's foot and hold the forelimb with the knee flexed in a comfortable, relaxed position.
2. When performing these exercises keep the lower limb directly underneath and in line with the upper forelimb, so that no rotational strain is placed upon the carpal joint.
3. Face your horse's side.
4. Support his lower limb and, by applying slight pressure to the forearm, gently ease the limb away from his body.
5. Facing his hindquarters, gently push the knee towards his midline - it can be useful to use your hip to maintain this position.
6. Then, holding on to the point of elbow gently ease it away from your horse's body.

