

The Stretches Horses 'Carrot' Do Without

The whys and hows of carrot stretches

Most of us are aware of the term "carrot stretches" but do we all know the benefits, how to conduct them effectively and how to tailor them to our individual horses?



Carrot stretches involve using a treat or carrot to encourage the horse to stretch through the neck and back. In doing this flexibility, core strength and balance can be improved within as little as 2-3 weeks. In this short time the horses range of motion can be improved, promoting suppleness and in turn aiding the prevention of injury. In completing these stretches, we can learn a lot about our horse's muscular limitations which can then be linked to our ridden work. The good news is carrot stretches are known as active stretches and are therefore very low risk. There are three types of carrot stretches; lateral flexion, rounding and extension. Not all of these need to be conducted for each horse. Specific stretches can be selected to complement a horse's weaknesses meaning the task becomes much more meaningful and less time consuming.

These stretches can aid the training of a horse in any discipline; improving suppleness into the contact in dressage, lifting of the neck and back in show jumping and increasing strength through

the back to gallop cross country. Stretching in general boosts sensory nerve endings within the muscle which relay information to the brain regarding position and movement. When injury occurs to a muscle, the sense of pain causes the body to limit the movement of the particular muscle, meaning other surrounding muscles take the compensating strain. Stretching after recovery of even minor injury can reset this. Circulation is increased, pain can be relieved and inflammation and muscle spasms can be reduced all through stretching. By completing these stretches after exercise, contracted muscles can be lengthened and relaxed, reducing the risk of a pulled muscle after workouts.

The first type of carrot stretch, lateral flexion involves bending of the neck to the right and left side. Firstly, to the girth then the flank and finally the hock. This stretch can highlight how even the horse is to each side. The second type being rounding, involving stretching of the neck and back round and down towards the chest and then evenly between the front legs. The last type being extension, involving stretching of the neck and back up and forwards, gradually increasing the distance.

Top tips

- 🐾 Start all stretches with the horse stood square and balanced.
- 🐾 Any form of treat may be used.
- 🐾 Do not rush, force or strain the stretch.
- 🐾 Hold a stretch for around 10 seconds.
- 🐾 Ensure the ears remain level with each other so that the neck is not twisting to one side.
- 🐾 If the horse steps towards you, you may be asking too much.
- 🐾 Remain close to the horse during all stretches.
- 🐾 Allow the horse to rest for a few seconds and then repeat the stretch 3-5 times.



Begin stood with your back against the horse's shoulder. Encourage the horse to bend around you towards the girth (holding the treat roughly 2ft away from the horse's body no higher than the flank.) Progress the stretch towards the flank and then the hock when the horse is ready to do. The horse should not be twisting the head.



Begin stood directly to the side of the horse. Encourage the horse to bend towards the chest keeping the head and neck even and straight. Progress the stretch towards the knees and then the fetlock when the horse is ready to do.



Stand directly in front of the horse. Encourage the horse to bend the neck up and out towards you keeping the head and neck even and straight. Progress the stretch forward and away from the horse's body when the horse is ready to do. If the horse keeps stepping forward stand side on with one hand holding the treat and one hand on the horse's chest (ensure you are holding the treat straight in front of the horse and not to one side).

Stretches should be completed 3-6 times a week. Each stretch should be repeated 3-5 times and held for around 10 seconds. A few seconds rest should be given between each stretch. The further from the withers the harder the stretch. It is important not to stretch too far too soon but rather slowly build the stretch over time. The stretch should be completed to around 75% of the horse's maximum stretch point.

When completing these stretches for the first time, make note of which of the three stretches the horse found easy, which of the three stretches the horse can already do at a harder level (further from the withers) and how even the lateral stretches are to the left and right side. Stretching can be time consuming on our already long list of yard duties, however certain stretches can then be specifically selected to suit an individual horse, minimising the amount of stretches you need to do. You can focus on the stretches the horse struggled with and therefore showed less flexibility within. Use the stretches to even up a one sided horse (e.g. complete more stretches on the weaker side) and even consider the weakness displayed in stretching in your ridden work (e.g. less flexibility in extension, ride more long and

low). The number of times a week these stretches are conducted can also be reduced over time when the required progress has been seen.

Being active stretches (where the horse is in control and performs the stretch themselves) these stretches are low risk and can be carried out when the muscles are warm or cold. However, muscles being warm for stretching is recommended as you will further reduce any risk of injury and should achieve a better stretch than when muscles are cold.

Carrot stretches can improve the horse's flexibility, stability and strength meaning they can also reduce the risk of injury. Stretches are informative and can allow us to monitor our horses, identifying any muscular issues early on. This information can also allow us to plan a stretching routine tailored to our horse rather than completing all stretches available saving us time. If conducted sensibly, these stretches are very low risk and suitable for an array of horses. So why not add them to your horse owners tool box!

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