



Horse Care Info Sheet

Ensure Your Horse is Fit

Whether you have a new horse or a horse that is returning to work after time off, a well thought out fitness program is a must to help reduce the chance of training injuries. Consider your horse's conformation—how your horse's body is built determines what jobs he will or will not be suitable for, and how well he will be able to complete those jobs. Here are some helpful tips to ensure your noble steed reaches the desired level of fitness and muscle tone in order to stay sound.

Overall Health Check

"It is always good practice to have a vet perform an overall health check to ensure there is no lingering lameness that can cause problems for a horse when training them hard," says Gayle Ecker, director at Equine Guelph. The main priority is to ensure the horse is in peak health condition. Knowing your horses' normal heart rate, temperature and breathing rate before you begin a training program is important. A work back plan falls into place once you have an understanding of your horses' current fitness level and set an end goal.



The Horse Health Check

Legend:
● Stop!
● Caution!
● Go!

Eyes
 Bright, clear
 Glassy
 Fixed stare,
 sunken eye

Capillary Refill
 0-1 seconds
 2-3 seconds
 4+ seconds

Mucous Membranes
 Pink, moist
 Pale, tacky
 Dry, purple, blue

Attitude
 Bright/eating/drinking
 Depressed/lethargic
 Dull, not interested, absence of thirst,
 appetite, urination or defecation

Injular Refill
 1-2 seconds
 2-3 seconds
 4+ seconds

Skin Pinch
 0-1.5 seconds
 2-3 seconds
 4+ seconds

Respiratory Rate
 Relaxed/regular
 Panting, inversion
 Laboured, abnormal

Wounds/Saddle/Girth
 No visible marks
 Heat/swelling/tenderness
 Pain/raw/bleeding

Muscles/Back
 Relaxed
 Tight or tender
 Very tight or tender

Gut Sounds
 Normal sounds
 Reduced/increased
 Absent or abnormal sounds

Heart Rate
 (after strenuous exercise)
 <68 in 10 minutes
 68 in 10-30 minutes
 >68 in 30 minutes

Gait
 No abnormal gait
 Slight gait change
 Consistent gait change
 or non-weight bearing

Rectal Temperature
 <38.6 °C pre-ride
 <39.6 °C during ride
 39.5-40.4 °C during ride
 >40.5 °C

Anal Tone
 Tight
 Slightly loose
 Anus/penis relaxed

Joints/Legs
 No heat or swelling
 Heat/swelling
 Pain/raw bleeding

Impulsion
 Free, willing, eager
 Stumble/short stride
 Stiffness/limping

For more information please visit, www.equineguelph.ca & www.equinesciencecertificate.com

Developed by Art King, DVM and Gayle Ecker, not to be copied without written permission

Legs which x-ray and ultrasound clean, are desirable for every horse. This often occurs at the same time as a pre-purchase exam if your vet makes the recommendation. Both, you and your trainer, should agree that the horse is suitable for the tasks you have in mind. There are often special fitness considerations depending on the time of year. Winter often coincides with poor turn-out conditions and (if you do not have the luxury of an indoor arena) less than ideal surfaces to ride on. Riding on poor footing can cause strain on muscles and tendons. Many horses are given more time off in the winter and will lose some muscle tone.

A routine vaccination and deworming program is very important. Horses carrying a worm burden may suffer health issues and won't be able to perform at their peak. "Parasites rob the horse of important energy that should be used for athletic performance," says Ecker. "As for vaccinations, athletic horses are trailered far and wide and often come in contact with many other horses from all regions." Your horse should be wormed regularly 5 times a year using products prescribed by your vet. Taking care of routine details are simple steps to ensure your horse is ready to start training.

Horse's Diet

The amount of food a horse requires will depend on several factors such as workload, size and temperament. If your horse has had the winter off and you are preparing for an increase in exercise intensity, it is possible food intake will need adjusting. Your horse's diet should be altered according to its body condition. If he is overweight then increasing his food intake is NOT ideal. However, it is important to make sure your horse is receiving proper nutrition from hay and grain to prepare for physical activity. Electrolytes are important to add to your horses feed in the summer to replace nutrients lost in sweat. When horses sweat profusely large amounts of water and electrolytes are lost. Extra electrolytes relative to sweat losses are an important part of an optimal diet. It is

ideal to consult with a nutrition specialist, who can assess a horse's diet before training begins. Energy, vitamins and minerals may need to be increased in a working horse. When a horse eats dirt, bark or feces, it can be an indication they are lacking an appropriate level of minerals.

Getting in Shape

Is your horse fit enough for the job you are intending? Your horse should not be under, or overweight when preparing for competition or a heavier work routine. You shouldn't be able to see the ribs when looking at your horse but if you run your hand across the barrel you should easily feel them. A horse kept outside all winter, eating only hay, may have lost weight and muscle tone. In this instance an increase in calorie intake will be required when starting back to work. This is where a body condition scoring chart comes in handy. "The optimal score for your horse is a four to five," said Ecker. "Having your horse at this weight and fitness helps to prevent excessive damage to the legs, which can occur when carrying too much fat." Keeping your horse at this score helps to maintain mobility, range of motion and muscle development. Multiple body condition scoring charts have been produced, and the descriptions of the levels are different. This article refers to the Henneke scale of 1-9. Ideally, you want your horse to have a smooth appearance to the skeletal structure with the ribs and pelvis covered.

Training History

How you begin your horse's fitness regime is determined by his training history. A gradual introduction back to work is recommended for horses that have had time off. This may mean starting with 20 minutes of walking as the initial routine for a few weeks. "A horse with little or no previous fitness should be brought back to work slower, and the owner or rider should pay more attention to lameness caused by overwork," says Ecker. If your horse falls into the category of having time off then you should tailor the duration and intensity of exercise to his current fitness level. Start back slowly and increase your horse's work out progressively each day as he gets back into shape. This will be based on his sweat levels during the work out, and ability to bring respiratory and heart rates back down to normal when at rest. A horse with previous conditioning will gain fitness faster.

DEHYDRATION



Look for signs:

- dullness
- sunken eye
- lethargy
- depression
- dry skin and mouth
- drawn up flanks (tucked up)
- thick saliva, dry and pale mucous membranes
- high level of protein in the blood (determined by a blood sample)

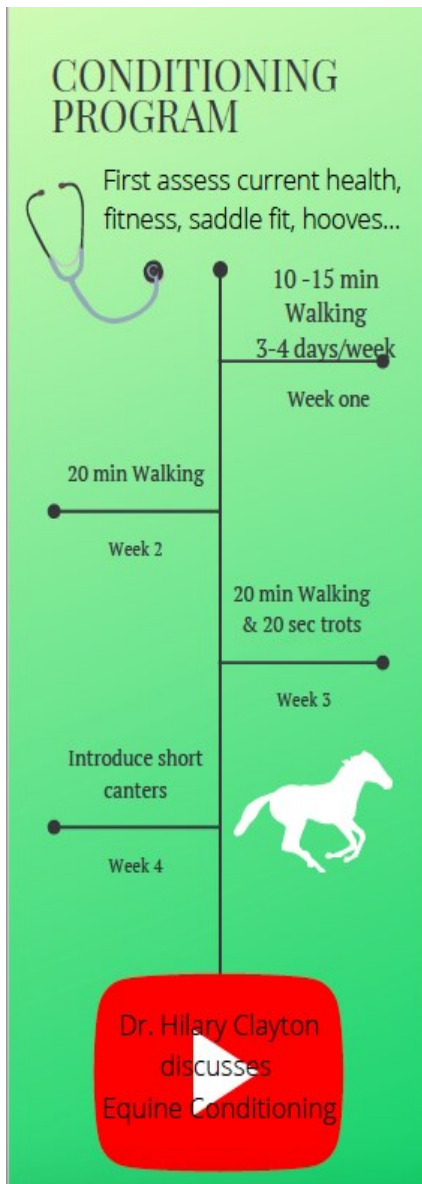
Skin Pinch – This picture shows a horse with a severe prolongation of the skin pinch, indicating a serious level of dehydration.

Learn how to [perform a skin pinch test](#)

ELECTROLYTES

Dehydration in horses can be an extremely serious situation and may occur during strenuous exercise, stressful situations, or in cases of bouts of diarrhea. The lack of water can include the lack of electrolytes. Electrolytes include the minerals: sodium, chloride, potassium, magnesium and calcium. The lack of electrolytes can lead to kidney failure and other health issues if the horse is not quickly rehydrated.

[More info...](#)



More Resources:

- [“Resuming the Training of a Horse”](#) - Video with Dr. Mark Hurtig of the Ontario Veterinary College
- [“What precautions do you take to start training after time off?”](#) - Video with Dr. Judith Koenig of the Ontario Veterinary College
- [“Hot: What you need to know about keeping your horse properly thermoregulated in hot weather”](#) - Equine Guelph infosheet

To learn more about Equine Guelph’s exercise physiology course, go to:

<http://www.equinestudiesonline.ca/events/exercise-physiology/>

Learn your horse’s normal temperature, pulse and respiration and more by downloading the Equine Guelph [Horse Health Tracker app](#).

Check out this new [video from Dr. Hilary Clayton](#) “After time off, how do you start and when do you move forward?”