

## Keeping Fit in the Off-Season

As the days shorten and the weather gets chillier, who doesn't tend to move indoors and put on a little 'winter fat'? Wouldn't it be nice, come spring to already be in shape so you can enjoy your horse, and make it through the competitive season without aches and strains?

Many people associate getting fit with carving out time to drive to a gym. The good news is that with some smart tweaks to your lifestyle, you can significantly improve your ability for riding, or fitness for barn chores without breaking the bank for equipment purchases. If you do have a gym membership, you can maximize your workout opportunity to help you in ways that directly benefit you back at the barn or out on the trail.

No doubt about it: if you care for, ride or work with horses, you are probably one of the busiest people you know. Fitting fitness into your schedule can sometimes be a real challenge. If you are like 52% of the Canadian population, you know you need it. You may even suffer from back pain, pulled muscles, repetitive strain or fatigue due to the demands of barn chores, or riding.

The question is, when, and what type of fitness regime?

It's important to understand that most injury, muscle and joint strain occur when the body cannot respond to sudden demand, or from repetitive strain caused by overuse of specific muscles. Balance and flexibility are very important to riding performance and enjoyment, and to your general ability to perform daily activities around the house or barn.

All riders can benefit from exercises which help improve your self-carriage as a rider, and ability to control your body to produce more effective aids, without strain on joints or muscles. Simply put, the fitter you are, the more you can just enjoy your horse.

If you compete in equestrian sports, cross-training can keep you in top shape for competition early in the season and those long days at the show grounds. Pleasure riders are often more prone to injury and strains such as back pain, or even cardiac issues due to the familiar weekend-warrior syndrome. Muscles are simply not strong or flexible enough, and the cardio-vascular system is not as efficient as it could be to support the demands made by occasional riding.

Barn chores are not only demanding on the body, but repetitive and tend to work specific muscle groups, but do not also strengthen all the counterbalancing or stabilizing muscles. Weaker muscles leave joints more vulnerable to strain. Lower back pain, knee and shoulder strains are common complaints.

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The first key to better fitness is to keep the basic fitness components in mind: nutrition, body composition, cardio-vascular ability, muscle strength, and flexibility. Depending on what you are doing in the saddle or barn, your cross-training program may focus on one or two of these areas more than others.

### **Nutrition**

Eating properly is one of the biggest factors affecting your energy level, and ability to sustain prolonged periods of activity around your horses. You probably know the calcium content of your horse's feed, but could pay a little more attention to your own nutrition. The Canadian food-guide recommends 5-10 servings of breads, 5-12 of fruits and vegetables, 2-3 of meats and 2-4 of dairy per day. Your basic calorie requirements are calculated based on your weight, and activity level.

Generally, your body is more efficient at extracting nutrients from food in smaller quantities (under 400-600 calories at a time), so eating smaller, more frequent meals not only meets your needs for dine-on-the-go with your busy schedule, but is also healthier.

### **Body Composition**

Simply put, body composition is described by your muscle/fat ratio, or BMI. It is not healthy to exceed 25%. Body composition is not about thin-ness or weight, as much as it is about the amount of fat your body is carrying around your organs, and how much work your muscles have to do to move your body.

For riding and barn chores, an out of balance body fat percentage means greater risk for disease, and places your muscles and joints at greater risk for strain because they are asked to move dead weight. Maintaining a balanced riding position can also be more difficult.

Your lack of ability to balance and control your body weight distribution in the saddle may be a significant factor in causing strain on your horse's joints, ligaments and muscles as your horse seeks to maintain its balance. While it isn't necessary to be petite, good riders have the self-carriage they expect of their horse, freeing the horse to perform at his best without risk.

### **Cardio-vascular or Aerobic Exercise**

Fitness guidelines suggest 30 minutes of cardiovascular activity that elevates your heart-rate 3-5 days a week. A healthy resting heart-rate range for an adult is between 60-75 beats per minute. For most people, the target training zone is somewhere between 120-145 bpm, and is calculated based on your age and resting heart-rate. You may need very little additional cardio-vascular exercise if you are already engaged in more rigorous activities on your horse. You might get an adequate extra 'push' for your cardio-vascular health simply by rounding out your week with a couple of brisk walks. If you are engaged primarily in activities which are less demanding for your heart, additional

cardio-vascular workouts will improve your stamina for your sport, while burning calories and helping you stay more heart-healthy.

With cardio-vascular activity, it really doesn't matter what you do, as long as your heart-rate is elevated into your target training zone for at least 10-30 minutes, depending on your fitness level.

Your target training zone should feel like work, but comfortably sustainable, without leaving you short of breath. If you are really pressed for time, try increasing the intensity of some other activity such as barn chores or grooming, so that you are doing the activity in your target training zone for the 10-30 minutes you need, then drop the intensity back down. You'll not only get the chores done faster- you'll get your heart in shape while doing them!

### **Strength Training**

Regardless of your equestrian activity, demand is placed on specific muscle groups over long periods of time, or in short bursts of force. Muscles work like elastic bands counterbalancing across your body and joints to maintain alignment, and minimize undue strain on joints. Muscles that are strengthened without their counterbalancing muscle group also being worked, end up pulling your body out of alignment and causing strain. Muscles that are not fit for an activity, but are placed under sudden stress, will pull and tear. While it is not necessary to bulk up, training your muscles evenly will reduce opportunity for strain. Common errors are to either focus on exercises that train muscles already in high use, or else to do no muscle conditioning at all.

For example, riding places a high demand on the gluteus maximus (buttocks) and hamstring muscles. These are very powerful muscles connecting the back of the leg, to the pelvic area. The counterbalancing muscles are the quadriceps and psoas major, or hip flexors. Many riders complaining of lower back pain seek to address the issue and to develop better posture through strengthening the abdominal and erector spinae (long back) muscles.

While a strong core is an important part of complete rider conditioning, often the problem is an imbalance in the leg muscles from back to front, tipping the pelvic area, throwing back alignment off. The much smaller erector spinae and abdominal muscles were never designed to effectively counterbalance the glutes and hamstrings, and exercising them cannot compensate for weak quads and hip flexors. It would be more appropriate in many cases to have a strength training program that balanced the hamstring and glutes with the quads and hip flexors so that the pelvis was properly supported.

To help your body cope appropriately, it is important to do exercises for each muscle group, at least twice a week, with a break of at least 48 hours between two workouts for the same muscle group. It is more important to exercise your whole body weekly, than it is to worry about how much weight you are using for the exercises. For many people,

exercise bands, an exercise ball and a few free weights are completely adequate, very affordable- and portable.

A good rule of thumb when doing strengthening exercises is to start with your larger muscles, and work down to the smaller ones: legs, chest and back, then arms, then abs. Going back to our example, an effective exercise that strengthens quadriceps and hamstrings evenly is a simple, body-weight squat that can be done anywhere.

Even if all you have is 20 minutes a day, and no equipment, you can do body-weight exercises and movements which will help you achieve and maintain balanced body carriage. Whether you choose Pilates, simple home exercises, or hit the gym, you will see benefits in less fatigue, more energy, and better ability to exert yourself for longer with less likelihood of strain. Strength training has added side-benefits of improving bone and ligament strength, and reducing likelihood of injury when a sudden or unexpected demand is made on your body.

### **Flexibility**

Flexibility is perhaps one of the easiest fitness components to integrate into your week- and yet it is often the most ignored. The problem with ignoring stretching is that you leave your muscles tight, and tight muscles tear when demand is placed on them. Also, ligaments and tendons which are tight cannot flex and respond in sudden strain situations.

Going back to the above example of a rider with tight glutes and hamstring muscles, strength training the counterbalancing muscle groups is only part of the equation. It is also very important to have even flexibility, so that muscles are not only strong, but also supple and available to respond effectively. An imbalance in suppleness has similar effects to an imbalance in strength for pulling your body out of alignment.

Canada fitness guidelines suggest incorporating stretching into your life daily. The easiest way to do so without added demand on your time is to take every opportunity you can: waiting in line, talking on the phone, watching TV in the evening, taking a breather in the barn.

A common error many people make is to stretch before placing demand on muscles: before a workout, or ride. This is not a good idea because the muscles are cold, and stretching them before asking them to work places them at greater risk of strain during the workout. Stretch when you dismount, after your workout, or after barn chores while your muscles are warm.

A rule of thumb to keep in mind is to stretch until you feel it, but not until it is painful, and to hold the stretch for several deep breaths, relaxing a little more at each breath.

In summary, you do not have to become a workout fanatic to keep yourself fit, and keep off the winter fat during the colder weather. As the days shorten, adding a little smart

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fitness time into your day will not only keep you on top of your game, but will help keep you feeling good when you can't be in the saddle.

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