

FEATURE Flex your fitness

Whether you ride for fun or competitively, having good physical fitness can help your partnership with your horse

Flex your fitness

Words:

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Being an equestrian means being a partnership, whether you're new to the saddle or a seasoned pro, it can be easy to focus on your horse's fitness and forget about your own. Exercising outside of riding can help you progress faster as a rider by improving your position and building your stamina.

As with any sport, riding takes a lot of practice to develop and hone your skills. It's not only about your horse's fitness but also yours as a rider, both in and out of the saddle. Not everyone needs the same level of fitness; it depends on your riding level and the activities you take part in. If you're someone who enjoys hacking out, you won't necessarily have the same requirements as a rider who competes regularly.

Bit of a stretch

Before you get started, prepare your muscles for physical activity. First, make sure to warm up your muscles through a short cardio session, like a brisk walk.

Then, you can start doing a few stretches to get the blood flowing. By doing regular stretching routines, you can improve your flexibility on the ground, which in turn will improve your flexibility on your horse.

Muscle tightness can also lead to restriction and sometimes pain in other areas of the body as they compensate for the restricted movement. For example, tight hip flexors can lead to lower back pain.

Balancing your partnership

Getting tired easily in the saddle can affect your balance and posture, causing your horse to work harder to compensate. This can increase the risk of injury for both you and your horse, as extra strain is placed on their back.

By improving your fitness, you'll find it much easier to keep your posture, balance and communicate clearly with your horse.



FEATURE

Walk your horse for the last 10 minutes of their cooldown

Feeling the flow

Cardiovascular fitness relates to your heart and the way it performs during exercise. Cardio exercise is anything that increases your heart rate, for example, walking, running, swimming or cycling.

Horse riding requires a lot of energy and stamina. Your heart rate increases, and you can become out of breath very quickly, depending on the activity you're doing.

Building your fitness will help you to ride for longer without getting out of breath. You'll have more energy, and you won't interrupt the flow of your session by stopping to catch your breath.

Getting to the core

Core strength is very important for all riders, regardless of your level of experience or discipline.

Through a stronger core, you'll find it easier to maintain your posture and stability, making you feel more secure and

confident when you ride. Good posture in the saddle allows you to use your aids more effectively to communicate with your horse.

As you progress as a rider and move up through the levels, your core becomes even more important as you learn more advanced movements such as sitting trot, lateral work, light seat or jumping. These will require you to have a lot of body awareness.

Teamwork makes the dream work

It's just as crucial to focus on your own fitness as it is your horse's. Don't forget you as a rider.

You don't have to go to the gym; you can set yourself small targets, such as walking your horse for the last 10 minutes of their cooldown. It's important to set goals that feel achievable to you. Yoga and Pilates can also be a good alternative, as both focus on building core strength and flexibility. EquiPilates is aimed at horse riders and targets the specific muscles and biomechanics used for riding.

Always pick a fitness routine that's right for you. By buddying up with a friend, you're more likely to achieve your goals and you'll have more fun! ▶

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Being an equestrian means being a partnership

Challenge Awards

Find out how to enhance your activity and fitness, nutrition and hydration so you're ready to sit in the saddle in the best way for you, and for your horse. Our series of Challenge Awards

will help you gain this knowledge to help improve your riding. They're open to anyone who would like to improve their horse knowledge or skills. Find out more at bhs.org.uk/riding-fit.

Exercise corner

Clare Howard, a Chartered Physiotherapist who specialises in horse riders and carriage drivers, talks through some simple exercises you can do at home.

“There are lots of exercises that are relevant and useful for horse riders. These are two of my favourites.

“Please be careful when you start a new exercise. If you have any underlying illnesses or injuries, it’s best to check with your GP or physical therapist. These exercises shouldn’t cause you any pain; if they do, then you should stop.”

Exercise one — engaging your muscles

“Start by sitting on a stool, chair or gym ball. Place your arms across your chest and slowly twist around from one side to the other, going as far as you comfortably can. Repeat three times in each direction. Repeat this pattern slowly with your arms at shoulder height, and then with your arms at eye height.

“Gym balls are useful for horse rider exercise as they encourage the postural and balance muscles to engage while we’re sat on the ball, in a similar manner to horse riding.”

Exercise two — finding your balance

“When you’re comfortable sitting on a gym ball and lying on your tummy over the ball, try this excellent exercise — side lying.

“Lie on your side over the gym ball, in as close a straight line to ear, shoulder, hip, heel, as you can — no collapsing in the middle. When you’ve found your balance, slowly lift your top leg approx. 20cm/8 inches until it’s in line with your trunk. Then lower your leg and repeat 10 times on each side. You might find this exercise considerably easier on one side than the other.

“This exercise is one of my favourites because it asks our brain and body to do different activities with different areas of our body, like when we ride. Your upper body is draped in a relaxed position over the top of the ball. Your lower leg and trunk are supporting your body in a static position, while your upper leg is actively moving.”

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It’s important to set goals that feel achievable to you

Exercises posed by Emma Bailey