

What is Pilates?

Pilates is a conditioning system that increases core stability, strength and body awareness; redresses imbalances, and re aligns the body from the inside out. It can improve posture, achieve a balance between strength and flexibility and relieve tension. It is popular with Olympic athletes and sportsmen from all disciplines.

Developed by Joseph Pilates, an authority on movement and biomechanics, he continually developed and refined a programme of exercises and stretches based on the principal that a strong core supports the back and minimises the risk of muscular damage.

Pilates for Horses?

Many of the Pilates principals can be applied to the horse. 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 can reduce the risk of injury.

Stimulating and strengthening the core muscles will come through correct work and skilful use of ridden movements and exercises as directed by your trainer. There are however a number of exercises, performed from the ground, which can supplement ridden work to help to improve core stability.

By performing these specific exercises, the core muscles that make for good posture, a strong back and assist in carrying the weight of the rider can be strengthened. These include the deep internal muscles of the abdomen, pelvis, thoracic sling, and back together with the more superficial muscles of the trunk.

Core strengthening exercises can be invaluable as part of a rehabilitation programme following injury. Using specific exercises to target and stimulate weak or injured muscles can be particularly useful. Following permission from your vet, any well qualified therapist will be able to advise on an individually designed programme of exercises.

Some Useful Terminology:

Adduction	Moving the limb inward, across the body.
Abduction	Moving the limb outward, away from the body.
Protraction	Moving the limb forwards (includes the swing phase of the stride)
Retraction	Moving the limb backwards (includes the stance phase of the stride)

Stretching Exercises for Horses

The main objective of successful training is to achieve the best possible performance, improve athletic ability and keep the horse injury free. Vets and therapists are becoming increasingly aware of the advantages of stretching and many sports therapists perform stretching as part of their treatment. Maintaining a healthy musculature, flexibility and suppleness is an important factor in reducing the risk of muscle or tendon damage.

As longer muscles are automatically more supple, stretching is an important aspect of elongating the muscle fibres and can help reduce injury by lessening the tension on joints, tendons, muscles and ligaments.

Tendons are less elastic than muscles and therefore are dependant on the elasticity of the body of the muscle itself - another good reason for keeping muscles in tip top condition! Proprioception (body spatial awareness), co-ordination and balance are all vital to good performance. If improvements are made to elasticity, flexibility, range of movement and reflex response time, then the reaction speed of movement is increased, resulting in better co-ordination. Stretching also improves the circulation of blood and lymphatic fluids allowing more oxygen and nutrients to enrich the muscles and for the toxic by-products of metabolism to be removed more efficiently – an important factor in preventing fatigue and reducing recovery time.

Types of Stretching

There are two main types of stretching:

Passive stretches are performed by a handler. The horse needs to be relaxed and confident to achieve these stretches

Active Stretches require active muscle contraction from the horse to move the body parts and create the stretch himself. Active stretches can be performed during ridden or groundwork exercises, and also with the use of carrots.

Cold connective tissues which have low blood saturation can be more susceptible to injury therefore it is absolutely vital that the horse is warm. Never attempt to stretch cold muscles.

How to Stretch:

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

Stretching can:

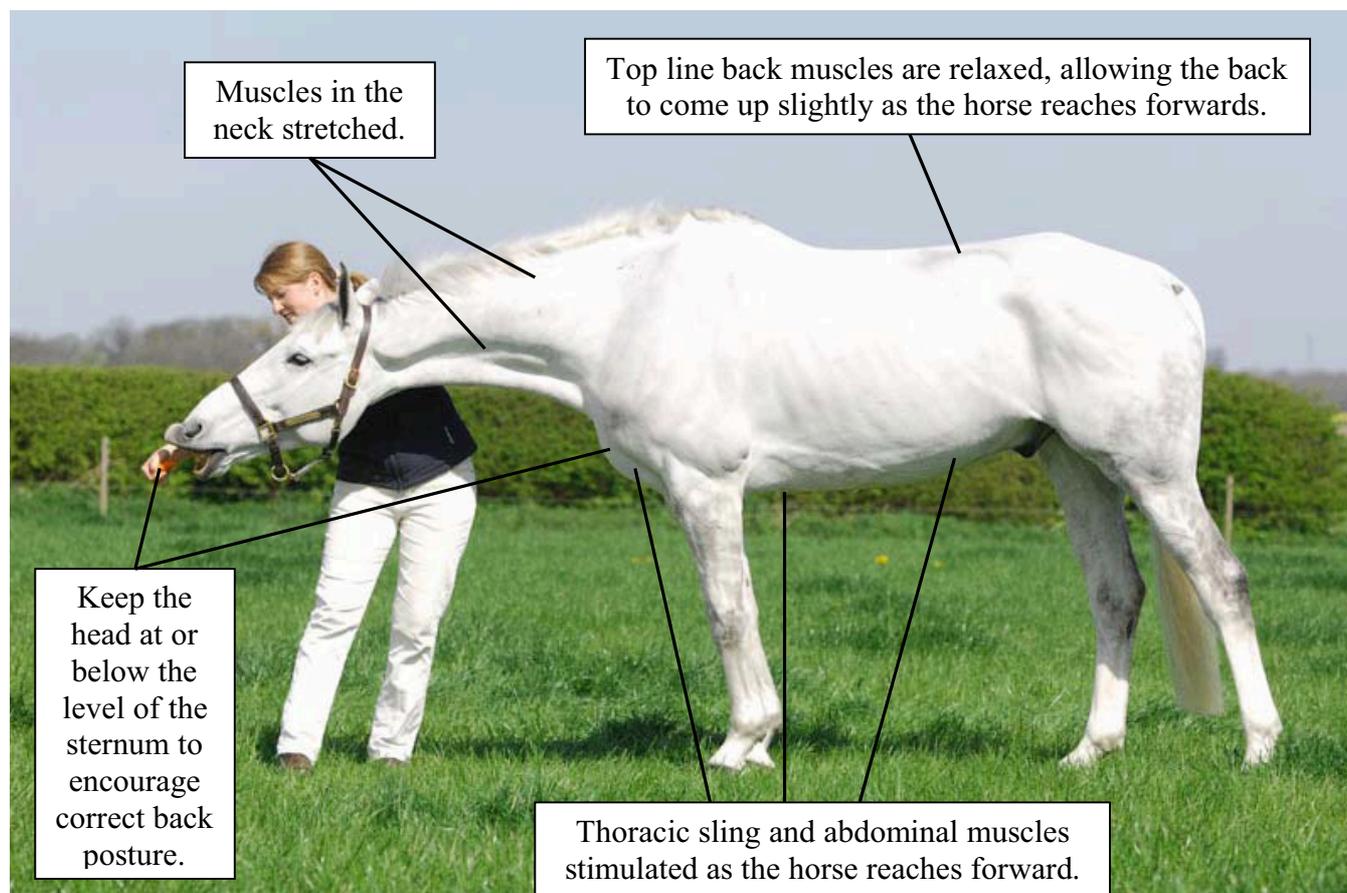
- Increase stride length, range of movement, engagement, flexibility, athleticism and suppleness
- Reduce muscular soreness, tension and stiffness
- Reduce the risk of injury to joints, muscles and tendons
- Improve co-ordination
- Maintain the current level of flexibility
- Increase mental and physical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

If in doubt seek assurance from your vet and take advice from a therapist. He will assess your horse's musculature and plan a suitable programme of stretches. He will also show you how to perform them safely without risk to either yourself or your horse.

Neck Extension

Aim:

- To stretch the Neck muscles by telescoping the neck forwards,
- To stimulate the core muscles as the horse leans in and reaches forwards.



How to do it:

This exercise is best performed over a low stable doorway.

- Prevent the horse from walking forwards; ideally by using a chain or rope across the doorway at sternum height. (Stable doors tend to be a little too high).
- Using a carrot, gradually encourage the horse to reach forwards.
- Keep the carrot at or below the level of his sternum. The head needs to be kept at this level to achieve optimum stretch effect and correct back posture.
- Encourage the horse to hold the position reaching for the carrot for 5-10 seconds.
- Repeat 3-5 times.

Tip:

Perform this exercise at the same time of day or the same point within his routine so he does not continually expect carrots.

Good for:

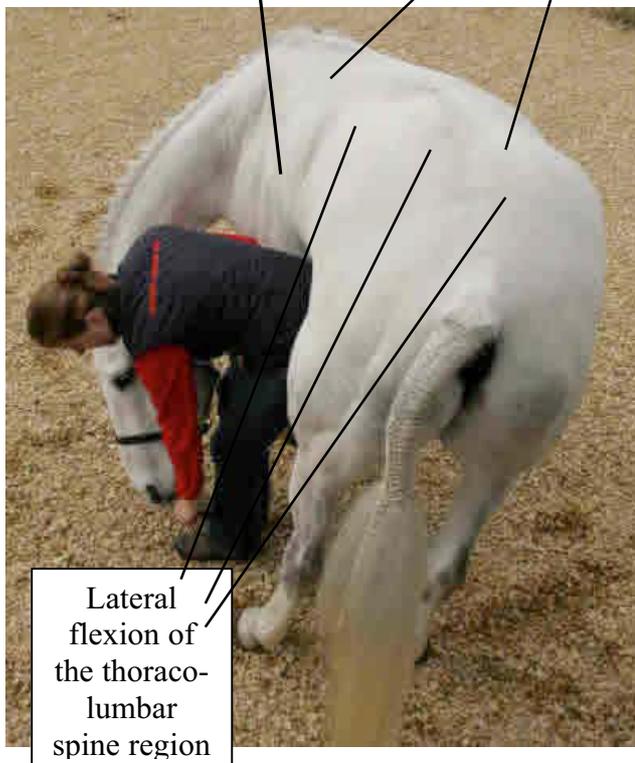
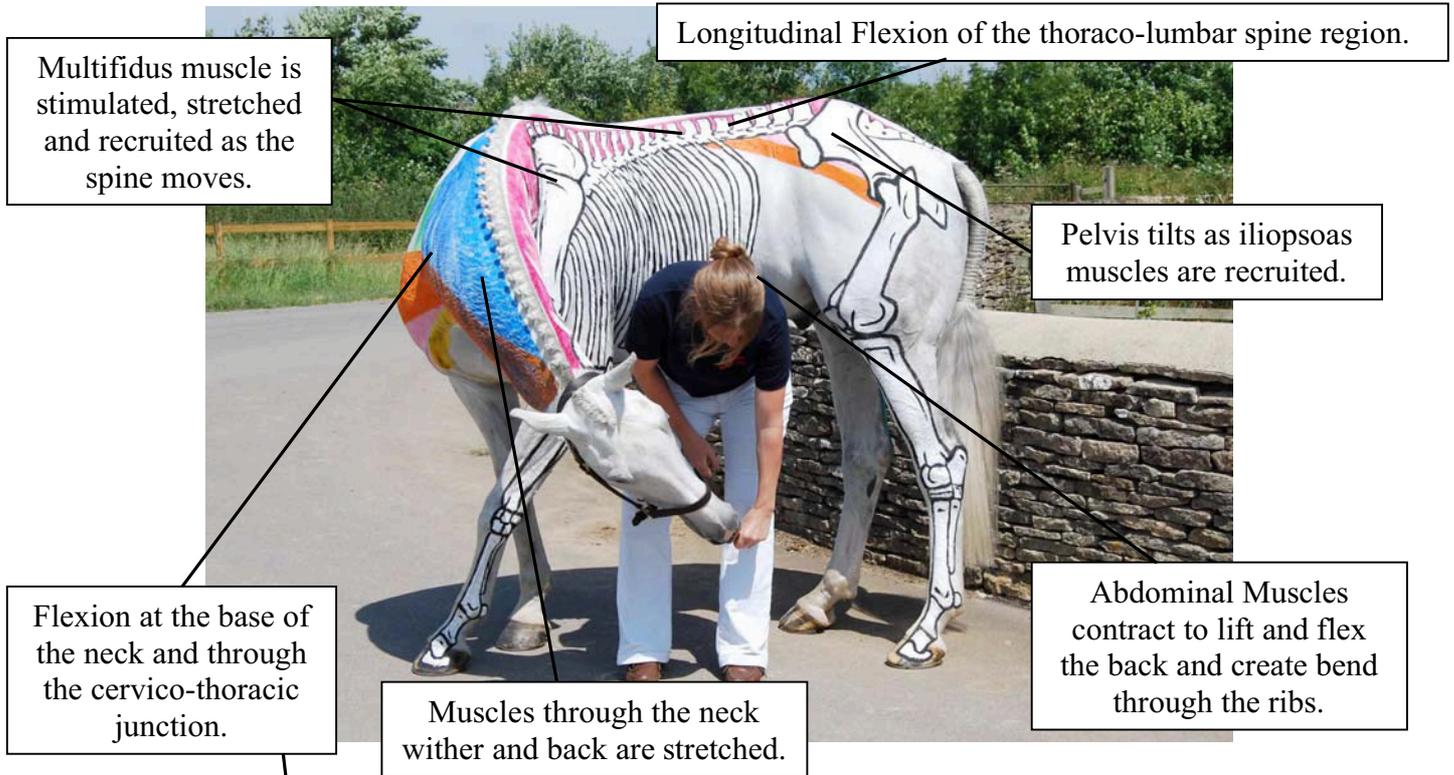
- Stretching the neck to release the muscles after working.
- Promoting correct posture and vertebral alignment.
- Horses that tend to work short and tight in their neck and those that drop behind the contact.

Carrot Low to the Side

Aim:

- To lift and flex the spine to the side and to flex the base of the neck.
- To increase core stability, abdominal strength, back flexibility and suppleness.

This exercise is equivalent to our sideways sit up (lateral crunch)!



How to do it:

- Stand with your back against the horse's ribs level with the girth line.
- Holding the carrot in the hand closest to the tail, encourage the horse to bring his head across your body.
- Bring the carrot down to just below your knee. Keep the carrot close to the horse's lips to keep the movement smooth.
- Hold the stretch for 5-10 seconds before allowing the horse to take the carrot.
- Repeat 2-3 times per session gradually increasing the stretch by taking the head further back.
- As the exercise becomes easier stand nearer the tail.

Good for:

- Improving suppleness through the base of the neck and the back.
- Supporting the correct posture of the back
- Improving the ability to bend.

Tips:

- Perform this exercise in the stable.
- Always maintain a contact between your back and the horse's ribs.
- To help achieve extra flexion, hold the end of his tail as well.

Carrot Between Front Legs

Aim:

- To lift and flex the withers, neck and back.
- To increase core stability, the musculature of the top line, abdominal strength and back flexibility.

This exercise is equivalent to our sit ups!



How to do it:

- Using a carrot, encourage the horse to bring his head down then back between his front legs.
- Keep the carrot close to the lips to discourage 'bounce'.
- Hold the stretch for 5-10 seconds before allowing the horse to take the carrot.
- Repeat 2-3 times per session gradually increasing the stretch by taking the head further back.

Tip:

Perform this exercise in the stable. In the smaller space he will soon learn to reach for the carrot rather than stepping back.

Perform this exercise at the same time of day within his routine so he does not continually expect carrots!

Good for:

- Flexing the base of the neck and lifting the back by stimulating the abdominal muscles.
- Promoting correct posture and support for the back.