



Jennifer Harris  
Equine Bodyworker  
502.598.6262  
UnlimitedEquine.com  
Serving all breeds and disciplines across the Bluegrass



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## Strengthen & Mobilize with “Carrot” Stretches

Carrot stretches can do more than just increase flexibility in your horse. They also serve to strengthen the abdominal (core) muscles. Doing so will improve your horse's suppleness and can enhance his ability to carry himself in a healthy way, which can increase athletic performance.

### Safety:

- Be sure you are working on flat, stable footing (such as arena sand).
- Minimize distractions and avoid areas/things that might spook your horse.
- Ensure your own safety - Be mindful of your body position and how you are holding the leadrope while performing the stretches.
- If your horse likes to snatch treats out of your hand, wear a thick leather glove or cut a hole in the center of a tupperware lid (slide the carrot through) to protect your fingers.
- Be careful to only move to your horse's comfort point. Never force a stretch. If you move past this point, the horse will begin to change position of his body to evade stretching “properly” - but in the only way he can.
- If your horse has an injury, or is unstable on his feet, always consult with your veterinarian before starting a stretching program.

### Tips:

- Cut your carrots into batons - Quarter them lengthwise and then cut them in half. This will reduce calorie intake, as well as chewed and eaten quickly after each stretch. If your horse requires calorie, sugar, or starch restriction, you can try other items as bait, such as celery, apple peels, watermelon rinds, hay cubes (or a handful of hay from his next feeding), or other commercially prepared low sugar treats. Just watch your fingers if the treats are small!
- Keep the carrot (or bait) touching your horse's lips so you can help guide his movement.
- Try to keep the movement smooth - you do not want your horse to perform these stretches in a jerking type movement
- If your horse wants to move his hindquarters away from you, as many are trained to do, start by using a wall or fence to prevent that movement while you are training him to do the exercises.
- It is important to watch your horse's posture as you are doing the exercises. We are looking for rounding up through the topline and back, and engagement of the abdominal muscles. If your horse hollows his back, he is having trouble doing the stretch and it is better to back off and either not do that particular exercise, or work to the point at which he can perform the stretch without hollowing.
- Do stretches after your horse's muscles are warmed up: after ridden work, or a 10-15 minute in-hand walk.
- Pick a few stretches to start with, then after a few weeks of doing them, switch your routine to include different stretches.

**Rounding Stretches** - Longitudinal stretches that stretch the neck and back, and engage the abdominal muscles.

To begin, ask your horse to stand relatively square. You are going to ask the horse to hold the stretch for 3 - 5 seconds. Then give him a few seconds to relax before you ask for another repetition. You will then repeat the stretch 3 - 5 times. Ideally you would do these stretches several times a week - 2x a day if at all possible.

1. Chin to chest
2. Between the knees
3. Down to fetlocks

When doing these stretches, ideally you want to keep your horse's neck straight - meaning, if you are looking at the horse from the front, you want his vertebral alignment to be straight. Some horses may want to bend their neck to one side or the other. Try adjusting the bait placement to straighten the neck. If your horse continues to bend his neck, try standing on the opposite side of his body. If that doesn't help, try backing off the stretch to the point where your horse can maintain a straight neck.

**Lateral Stretches** - Stretch the back laterally and engage the abdominals

To begin, ask your horse to stand relatively square. You are going to ask the horse to hold the stretch for 3-5 seconds. Try to keep the horse's ears parallel to the ground (see photo 1, 2,3) - In photo 4 you can see the head angle has changed and the ears are no longer parallel to the ground. Then give him a few seconds to relax before you ask for another repetition. Complete each stretch to the right and to the left. It is important to stretch both sides of the horse equally - however you will most likely notice more flexibility on one side - especially when you are first starting out. If your horse tries to move away from you, you can place your horse along a fence or wall to encourage them to keep their hind end stationary.

1. Wrap around to elbow
2. Stretch to stifle
3. Stretch to hock
4. Stretch to fetlock



## Tail Pulls

Only do these exercises if you know your horse is not likely to kick out if you are standing behind them. You may need an assistant to hold your horse, or put him in cross-ties if it is safe to do so - but it is important for the horse to have some ability to readjust his body and move his head, especially forward and down.

### Tail Circling

- Stand to the side of your horse's hindquarters. Hold the tail about 6 inches down from the tail head.
- Gently and slowly lift your horse's tail to the side and then move it upwards, exposing the underside of the tail, then back down, making a circle with the tail.
- Start with a small circle and increase the size of the circle as you make full circles. Circle to the left and the right 2-3 times.
- Note: If your horse clamps his tail, wait until he relaxes, you do not want to try this exercise when the muscles are clamped.



### Side Pulls

- Stand to the left side of your horse's hindquarters. Gently hold your horse's tail about 6 inches below the end of the bony portion.
- Gently pull the tail to the left. Your horse should shift his weight and follow the movement. Gently release the pressure and return the tail to the neutral position. Keep some tension on the tail, you do not want to release the pull suddenly as this could startle your horse, or throw him off balance. We're aiming for a gentle rocking. Repeat 2 to 3 times. Move to the right side and repeat the process.



### Tail Rock

- Stand behind your horse. Gently hold your horse's tail about 6 inches below the end of the bony portion.
- Gently pull back, keeping the tail in a neutral position. We're looking for the horse to gently rock forwards and backwards, shifting his weight and engaging muscles.



**Before you begin stretching, keep in mind that these stretches are not to replace any veterinary treatments, unless suggested by your veterinarian. Also, contact your veterinarian before stretching if your horse has any ligament scar tissue or torn muscles. Stretches can sometimes aggravate scar tissue and worsen previous injuries by reducing the horse's ability to use their compensatory movement.**

Citations:

[@LBEMG]. (2022, June 15). *5 simple Carrot Stretches for your Horse* [Video]. YouTube. [https://youtu.be/bO\\_Op1LrTSI?si=IRe3oijQWNkYqyD4](https://youtu.be/bO_Op1LrTSI?si=IRe3oijQWNkYqyD4)

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