



Equine Massage Therapy

Equine Massage is massage therapy for horses and is commonly used to enhance performance levels and endurance, to prevent injury and to aid the rate of recovery when injury has occurred.

The claimed benefits of horse massage include: Faster healing through the increased flow of blood to the muscles and improved dispersal of excess fluids and toxins. Enhanced muscle tone and range of motion. Stimulates circulation and releases endorphins the body's natural painkillers.

Equine Massage Practitioners advise the use of shorter regular sessions rather than infrequent longer sessions.

Massage of Horses can be beneficial in the following situations:

Pre-event : As part of a training and injury prevention program by loosening and warming muscles prior to competition.

Post-event : As part of the cooling down and recovery process by reducing soreness and stiffness in the muscles.

Maintenance : As a regular part of the horse exercise program to keep the muscles in tune and to aid in the prevention of injury.

Rehabilitation : As part of the recovery program to facilitate faster healing through increased blood flow and to prevent compensatory lameness.

Contra-indications

There are situations where massage is not recommended, for example where there is acute inflammation of the skin, soft tissue and joints, where bones have been fractured, where circulatory disorders persist, where there is the presence or danger of hemorrhage or tumors and in the event of sprains. However, veterinary surgeons are divided as to the efficacy of claims made by massage practitioners.

There is a body of opinion that says that prospective students of equine massage should qualify in human massage as an entry requirement. Indeed this is the case in Holland where a two year course in human massage is a prerequisite to undertaking training in horse massage.

In the less regulated US, many equine massage courses last 5 days or less which is little time to acquire an in-depth knowledge of physiology and anatomy which would be desirable prior to obtaining certification as a specialist in horse massage. Undoubtedly, the field of human massage has been much better researched and the widespread use of massage as an integral part of the training program of professional athletes is sufficient evidence for many that their competitive horses would also benefit from this form of therapy.

EQUINE SPORTS MASSAGE

By Joy Campbell LMBT, EM/M

Massage is defined as the systematic and scientific manipulation of soft tissues of the body for the purpose of improving and maintaining health.

Soft tissue is composed of more than 60% of the horses' body weight. Soft tissue includes the skeletal muscle which is



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needed to perform movement, tendons connect the muscles to the bones, ligaments connect the bones to bones, and fascia, which is an internal connective tissue that basically holds everything in its place.

This fascia covers and wraps around every muscle, tendon, organ, nerve, blood vessel and bone in the body. It holds organs in place, provides lubrication and a gliding structure for muscles to contract. They wrap around every muscle and muscle fiber to form into tendons that attach the muscles to the bone to create movement of the body. Fascia is composed mainly of collagen and elastin, which gives it its elastic properties. 90% of the elasticity in the body comes from the associated muscles, while only 10% comes from the tendons themselves. Making sure that the elasticity of the horses' muscles and tendons remain healthy is important in decreasing the chance of tendon or other serious injuries.

Tightness in the fascia system can be caused by Trigger Points, Stress Points, or adhesions. Trigger Points are muscle fibers that are stuck in a tetanic contraction that cannot fully release. Stress Points are similar to Trigger Points, but are usually found in or around the tendons, and adhesions are similar to and can be scar tissue.

When there is tightness in the fascia system, whether its from a Trigger Point a.k.a. "knot", adhesions (where the fascia is stuck or lost its gliding ability), or tight muscles, the horse will have limited Rang of Motion, or less flexibility in the joints. Although this might not create a problem initially, if left untreated, this will greatly increase the chances of muscle or tendon injuries. It's just a matter of time before that happens. It is advised to get a therapeutic massage at the first sign of muscular tension or discomfort, due to muscle memory. The longer the problem remains, the more time will be needed to resolve the issue since the horse is a master at compensation. The body will always try to remain in balance, even if it causes another area to tighten up to create that balance. Occasionally once you have successfully treated one area, another one immediately pops up. This is normal if the problem has been there for a while. Most athletes and trainers recommend a monthly maintenance schedule to reduce the muscle tension caused by a training program. Horses fall under the athlete category and should receive regular maintenance treatments to reduce chance of muscle or tendon injury.



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Massage for Hoofcare Professionals

Mike Scott

Equine Massage/Muscle Therapy

It's a known fact that as we see horses come in for trimming after years of improper shoeing or trimming that they can be very muscle sore. Conversely, as they are undergoing a specific trim program that has been implemented, they may become sore as well. Before we discuss some of the benefits or methods to alleviate this discomfort, it is necessary to briefly discuss the



anatomy and physiological changes we can see or expect to see. As we know, the horse's structure is the skeleton. In unison with the skeleton, there is a balance with the muscles, tendons, ligaments and fascia to hold the body upright. The feet are the foundation and as we have all heard a million times, 'no feet, no horse'. Perhaps one of the most important things we need to consider is the horse's postural preference or preferred stance.

Picture right: Friction along the tendons. Editor's Note: Yes, the horse has a shoe on. Mike Scott is a massage therapist, not necessarily a barefoot advocate. He submitted the pictures for this article.

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Approximation technique..... shorten the distance between the two hands. Pull the skin together with both hands simultaneously

Let's say for example that the horse deals with a high heel, low heel syndrome. When we perform our symmetry evaluation, in most cases we would find the foot that was not clubbed would be the foot that would be more spread or wider. This would be considered the 'good foot'. The thing a body worker needs to keep in mind is that that limb would take more pressure as the horse will tend to lean to that side. Therefore, spreading the foot. We would also notice that the non clubbed foot in most cases would possess a 'loaded shoulder' or hypertrophy of the shoulder muscles. The club foot may be diagnosed by some as a leg length discrepancy or shorter leg. In fact, it may be a functional leg length discrepancy but in fact may be the same. The angle of the shoulders will be different due to the feet.



This will all lead to imbalance, tension or compensatory issues that the therapist would need to address.

There are many causes, conditions and traumas that can manifest to muscular issues. The above mentioned is only one. A good example of how these problems of foot imbalance are felt is to kneel on the floor on all fours. Put about 65% of your weight toward the hands. In addition, put more weight on the heel of the palms of your hand. You can feel how this tension will travel up your arm in the flexors and up to the shoulder. If you do the same thing with the pressure toward the fingers, you will sense the tension along you



extensors and up the limb.

This will also initiate torque and pressure diagonally up the limb and eventually cause compensatory issue throughout the larger muscles of the body. Imagine the force you felt during this exercise exaggerated by an uneven foot with 1500 pounds atop it. The scope of the article doesn't allow me to get into the entire bio mechanics of compensation but it is something any equine practitioner should be familiar with.

So, what do you do as a Hoofcare Professional? On your initial evaluation after you have completed your history, symmetry evaluation, movement evaluation and foot assessment you should palpate the horse. It's not necessary to give them a full body massage but have a sequence or system that allows you to quickly evaluate (not diagnose) where the horse might be uncomfortable. Once this is determined, in just a couple minutes you might be able to employ a few easy techniques that can allow the horse to stand square more comfortably, making your job easier.

Easy to apply techniques:

Compression (picture right)

Friction (picture below right)

Direct Pressure

Myofascial

First, we need to determine where to focus our application. Let's look at the horse that has been compensating into his shoulder from a sore foot. We can start by taking our fingertips and tracing all the fascial lines or muscle delineation lines. These can be found easily in the shoulder, leg and tendons by tracing and letting your fingers fall into the grooves. Pressure can be determined by the individual horse and their tolerance. If the horse tenses or flinches away from you, you can start to compress the area.

To be complete with this, you may want to use the heel of your hand and compress around the wither. Next, follow down the line of the shoulder and with a rhythmic pumping motion press into the muscle. As the tissue starts to respond, you can use your fingertips or the pads of the fingers and apply pressure across the muscle fibers. This friction technique will help to alleviate tension and help to break up adhesions that were developed from compensation.

After these applications, you may feel small areas that are still tense or areas that the horse may tense against pressure. At this point, we can apply direct pressure with fingertips or thumbs. Hold these areas for approximately 30 seconds and you may feel a release in the tension.

On the lower limb and in the areas of the shoulder previously mentioned, we can also employ myofascial techniques. Along the bulky muscles, you would use flat hand pressure. With one hand the pressure would be applied by lean-



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ing into the tissue. With the other hand, use equal pressure but very gradually 'stretch' the skin and fascia (connective tissue) away from the anchored point. Along the lower limb, you can encompass the limb with your hands and move the connective tissue up and down or 'wring' side to side.

These descriptions are very brief and to have them make more sense, it would be wise to hire a massage therapist to work with the horse. You could observe them and ask for pointers.

There are many classes in massage available and they range from an introduction day to extensive certification programs.

For more information, contact Mike Scott by e-mail msscott@equinemassagetraining.com or visit his website www.equinemassagetraining.com

History

Although equine massage appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon, in fact, it is not. Historians note that massage therapy of horses can be traced back *thousands of years* to the Greeks, who would massage both horses and warriors prior to engaging the enemy in battle.

In Europe, the U.K., Canada, Asia, and the Pacific Rim, massage therapy has long been employed to enhance equine athletic ability. Two notable animal massage & physical therapists are Jean-Marie Denoix and Jean Pierre Hourdebaigt.

In the United States, it is said that Equine Sports Massage Therapy officially began in the 1970's with Jack Meagher, a highly-skilled and well-respected human physical & sports massage therapist for the NFL. In 1976, Mr. Meagher was invited by the United States Equestrian Team to join them to use his equine massage technique (The Meagher Method) for the Montreal Olympic Games at which they won the Gold Medal. The Meagher Method is still the classic standard against which most others are judged. More recently, ESMT has become the mainstay of U.S. Olympic equestrian teams and the horse-racing industry.

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