

The Equine Athlete Benefits from Massage Therapy

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What Is Equine Sports Massage Therapy?

Massage is an ancient technique that developed in many different cultures around the world. In 2000 B.C. appeared the first written record of massages being used, appeared in medical texts from Egypt, Persia and Japan. Developed originally for humans, these techniques became accepted and used on companion animals including equines.

Equine Sports Massage Therapy is the only therapy specifically designed to prepare the muscles for exercise through the manipulation of soft tissues and joints for therapeutic purposes. Movement is controlled by muscles, yet the musculoskeletal system is the most overlooked when issues come up. The muscles do not show up on radiograph or on many other tests. Massage aids in warming up the muscles and increasing circulation to the muscles and joints. By doing massage and stretching routines, freedom of motion is increased.

Don't assume that muscle problems will take care of themselves. They don't. Most injuries that are a direct result of muscle strain are the result of cumulative strains. Muscle issues build up for weeks before a trauma will occur. When the trauma occurs, it limits the horse in mind, body or both. Massage Therapy can help keep the equine muscles working for whatever activity the owner is involved.

What does Equine Massage Do?

An equine sports massage therapy treatment affects many body structures of the horse including:

- Muscular system (muscles and tendons)
- Skeletal system (joints, cartilage, ligaments, joint capsule and bone)
- Circulatory system (veins, arteries, capillaries and the heart muscle)
- Lymphatic system (vessels and lymph nodes)
- Respiratory system (lung function and oxygen/carbon dioxide exchange)
- Endocrine system (glands and hormone action)
- Eliminary system (urinary and gastrointestinal)
- Nervous system (motor and sensory nerves)
- Digestive system (stomach and intestines)

Massage Therapy often only directly affects the skin, muscles, tendons, ligaments, joint structures, blood and lymph vessels, and nerves that are closer to the surface. By affecting these areas closer to the surface of the equine, massage therapy can also be used effectively on areas deeper. Even more internal structures are affected through the massage, the blood flow or circulatory system, the nervous system and the release of chemical messages in the body.

Benefits of a Massage Program:

Equine Massage is particularly effective in treatment of injuries and is evolving into not only maintaining muscles, but aiding in the rehabilitation of the horse after an injury or illness. Properly and consistently applied, it reduces the time required for soft tissue injury to recover. Massages can aid in rehabilitation, as well as, help to support muscles and tissues surrounding a fracture. Equine Massage can also be effective in treating swelling, muscle spasms, scar tissue, strains, sprains, and general trauma.

Additionally, massages can improve an equine's circulation and muscle tone. It is helpful in relieving pain in animals with osteoarthritis and other areas of inflammation because the massage stimulates the brain to release endorphins that are natural pain-killers. Massages can help lessen inflammation, swelling and pain in joints.

Equine Massage has many benefits including:

- Relaxes muscle spasms
- Improves muscle tone
- Reduces congestion within blood and lymph vessels
- Stimulates and relaxes the nervous system
- Increases excretion of fluids
- Increases the exchange of substance between cells
- Encourages tissue repair
- Helps maintain flexibility
- Reduces inflammation of tissue in joints as well as enhances nutritional aspects
- Prevents the formation of adhesions and fibrous bands
- Increases intestinal movement
- Stimulates glands
- Helps clean pores

Massage can also be used to treat certain conditions including:

- Muscle spasms
- Swelling
- Fatigue
- Sprains
- Subluxations
- Atrophy
- Neuralgia/neuritis
- Fracture
- Scarring and adhesions
- Repetitive stress injuries

Equine Sports Massage Therapy is used to affect the soft tissues of the equine's body such as the muscles, tendons, ligaments, nerves and blood vessels to improve or maintain the general health of the equine's body structures to promote overall wellness and good health. A regular massage program can help by catching problems early when the issues are easier deal with. As a

performance measure, equine sports massage therapy enhances optimal functioning of the equine athlete.

Many injuries come with swelling. A massage technique that concentrates on unblocking the lymphatic system can help to increase the lymphatic flow and decrease the swelling as well as decrease the healing time. As long as the swelling is not excessive, using a light pressure massage technique along with soft pumping movements toward the lymph nodes helps the body to eliminate toxins and move fluids. This technique can be useful in the cases of edema, injuries and to aid the immune system of the equine athlete.

These and other therapeutic techniques are revolutionizing equine sports massage therapy into a part of a rehabilitative method working along with your veterinarian. Rehabilitative massage therapy occurs when there is a specific injury or diagnosis by a veterinarian in which the massage can be deemed to assist the equine in conjunction with veterinary care. Massage therapy when used in conjunction with veterinarian direction and care to promote a more complete recovery from a specific illness or injury more quickly. Massage therapy is not appropriate for all pathologies or injuries, but many can be helped by a combination of veterinary care and massage therapy.

Rehabilitative Therapeutic techniques include:

- Nerve manipulation
- Diagnostic massage (triggers information to call the veterinarian for further evaluation)
- Ice massage
- Swelling technique
- Origin and insertion technique
- Friction technique
- Trigger point therapy
- Fascial release techniques

Does your horse do or show signs of the following?

- Dislikes being groomed
- Prefer one rein
- Show lateral stiffness
- Reluctant to canter on one lead
- Hollow backed
- High headed
- Head shaking
- Bucking
- Cold backed with tacked up
- Lack of poll flexion and bend
- Head tilting
- Have an uneven stride length
- Holding the tail to one side
- Excessive rolling
- Girthing problems

- Stumbling
- Poor Disposition
- Loss of Performance Ability

These are all signs of pain and discomfort and should be investigated further by a practitioner.

An equine sports massage can assist in eliminating the pain and discomfort the horse is experiencing. During the evaluation and the massage, the whole horse is taken into account, not just bits and pieces.

If your horse has shown any of the above problems or you want to add good health maintenance routines to your horse's care, Equine Sports Massage Therapy can help. If your horse has chronic or long term muscular problems, one massage will help, but a series of massage treatments may be required to address all of the problems. Usually, positive results are seen after the first massage with increased flexibility and movement. Performance and overall disposition should also improve with a treatment schedule. The second and additional follow-up treatments will be in one to two week intervals. The goal is to have the horse on a maintenance plan that is every 6-8 weeks or as needed. The schedule is dependent on the performance level of the horse and what athletic performance is being asked.

How long does the massage last and what is a general schedule of treatment:

- Optimally, at least one hour is required to address the full body. An hour and a half (or longer) is ideal if there is a chronic condition or acute injury.
- For pre-show or event, schedule one to two days before the actual event.
- For recovery, schedule one to two days after a hard workout or event.
- For injury recovery, consider 2-3 sessions no more than a week apart, depending on the severity and acuity of the injury.
- For prevention & maintenance, at least 1 session per every 6 weeks.
- One can't have too many massages, you can determine with your equine massage therapist, the appropriate interval for your horse's individual needs and your pocketbook.

A common question by owners is "What can I do in between treatments to help my horse?"

After exertion, no matter if it is a weekend trail ride or performance classes, massages can minimize stiffness and speed repair of tissue damaged by physical stress and fatigue. Passive stretches can help to restore joints and muscles to full working order. Passive stretches are performed off the horse with a hands-on approach. The owner moves the horse's limbs through the entire range of movement.

A stretching routine as part of the overall maintenance program can also benefit your horse in many ways. Benefits include reduced tension and stiffness, increased elasticity and flexibility as well as improved coordination and stride length. The biggest benefit is the connection the owner and horse gain from working together through the stretching routine.

Note: Equine Massage and alternative therapies do not intend to diagnose a problem on its own. When working along with your veterinarian many benefits can be obtained.

To learn more about equine stretches and the benefits of equine massage and treatments, contact Lynette at (618)979-3192, email questions to QREquineUnltd@aol.com and check out her website www.quailridgequine.com