

Saddle Up for Summer: USU Offers Tips for Getting Horses in Shape

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Both humans and horses need to get in shape before jumping into summer activities. A Utah State University expert outlines the basics of horse conditioning.

“Conditioning should support the long-term health and happiness of the horse,” said Sarah Andersen, instructor in USU Extension’s Equine Assisted Services program. “If a horse is uncomfortable or mentally burned out, more work is not the solution.”

Horse conditioning is not simply about increasing exercise, she said. Successful conditioning programs begin with evaluating a horse’s physical and mental well-being before building strength and endurance.

Signs that a horse may need an adjustment to its routine include fatigue, loss of focus, delayed responses to rider cues, stumbling, excessive sweating, heavy breathing, irritability, or resistance during work. Horses showing pain behaviors or lameness should be evaluated before additional training is introduced.

“A proper conditioning plan begins with a full health assessment,” Andersen said. “This includes evaluation of pain, skin and coat condition, hoof quality, nutrition, dental care, saddle fit, and veterinary support. Horses should also be assessed for muscle symmetry, endurance, and recovery time after exercise.”

She said conditioning programs generally focus on three major goals – improving the horse’s movement and balance, increasing responsiveness to rider cues, and reducing overreaction to outside distractions.

“Warm-ups are considered one of the most critical parts of any training session,” Andersen said. “Horses should spend 10 to 20 minutes in an active forward walk before more demanding exercises begin. Walking helps lubricate

joints, warm muscles and tendons, improve blood flow, and reduce risk of injury.”

After walking, trainers recommend stretching exercises and gradual work at the walk, trot, and canter to engage the horse’s topline (the muscles that support the spine, from neck to hindquarters) and cardiovascular system.

Recommended Horse Conditioning Exercises

- Long walks and trail rides to build muscle and endurance
- Trot and canter sets to improve cardiovascular fitness
- Hill work to strengthen hindquarters and abdominal muscles
- Ground poles and cavetti exercises (stepping over low, evenly spaced poles) to improve flexibility and coordination
- Work on varied terrain to strengthen bones, tendons, and ligaments
- Lunging sessions focused on balance and proper movement
- Lateral work such as leg yields and shoulder-in exercises
- Backing exercises to engage core and hind-end muscles
- Stretching and core stabilization routines such as “carrot stretches” (using a treat to get your horse to stretch its neck and back)
- Start slowly, build gradually, and prioritize balance, straightness, and suppleness over speed or volume of work.

“Cooling horses down properly after exercise is essential,” Andersen said. “Horses should be walked until their heart rate, breathing, and body temperature return to normal. Stretching and light mobility work can help muscles recover and reduce soreness. Consistent daily habits make the biggest difference in long-term conditioning success.”

To learn more about USU Extension Equine Programs, visit extension.usu.edu/equine.

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