

Evaluating Equine Fitness

If you plan to take your horse with you on vacation--camping and trail riding--make sure he's fit to go.

By Sarah Christie

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BEFORE YOU GO...

You will probably want to spend many hours in the saddle to see as much country as possible. Do yourself and your horse a favor and make sure the two of you are fit enough for a riding vacation. Overweight or under conditioned horses are prone to saddle sores, heat stroke and fatigue-induced injuries. A sensible conditioning program starting six to eight weeks before your trip will make the excursion more pleasant for both of you.

To build endurance, try interval training on the trail. Start by trotting on level ground for five - 10 minutes, followed by three minutes of walking. Do this several times throughout each trail ride. Gradually increase the amount of trotting time, and add in some light hills after the first week or so. If you really want to monitor your horse's progress, invest in an equine heart monitor. This device can tell you when your horse is working too hard for his own good. Equine heart rates will vary between individuals and are affected by things such as age, weight, temperature, fitness, and illness or injury. In very general terms, an average, healthy adult horse's resting heart rate should be between 30-40 beats per minute. A healthy aerobic working heart rate range is between 100-140 BPM. If heart rate goes above 180 BPM, slow down!

As for your own comfort, a few adjustments will make multiple days in the saddle a little more comfortable. Sheepskin seat covers are available for every type of saddle. They provide additional rider comfort without sacrificing "feel" of the horse. Water bottle holders which fit snugly to the pommel or cantle of the saddle will allow you to have your drink of choice at your fingertips throughout the day. If you find your feet going numb after hours in the stirrup, try a closed-cell foam stirrup pad. Be sure to lengthen your stirrup leathers a notch to make up for the added height. And dismounting to walk down hills will not only give your horse a break, it prevents leg muscles from getting as sore.

Further Reading

Conditioning Horses with Hill Work
Selecting the Right Riding Vacation

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