

Equine Massage

Basic massage techniques you can do with your horse at home.

February 2008 HI Exclusive

After a long day in the office or a hard workout, a massage is the perfect answer to relieve those aching muscles. Horses also get tense from daily riding or even due to poor conformation. With the proper training and safety precautions, you can administer a relaxing, beneficial massage to your horse.

Barb Wells, a certified shiatsu equine massage therapist, gives you an introduction to some basic massage techniques and demonstrates their application in HorseChannel.com's video "Equine Massage," with help from horses at the J.F. Shea Therapeutic Riding Center in San Juan Capistrano, Calif.

Along with showing you how to give your horse a basic massage, Wells sat down with us to explain the concept of equine massage, its effect on your horse, health considerations, and both positive and negative responses from your horse to be aware of before trying this at home.

HI: What is equine massage?

Wells: Massage is the manipulation, methodical pressure, friction and kneading of the muscles. It's a non-invasive technique designed to enhance equine performance and reduce the risk of injury. It moves lactic acid and other toxins out of the muscle tissue while bringing oxygen and nutrients in by boosting blood circulation. It promotes healthier muscle tissue that can better withstand the strain of competition and daily use. The bones, tendons and ligaments benefit as well. Massage also positively affects the emotional well-being of your horse.

HI: How do I know if my horse needs massage?

Wells: If your horse has exhibited any of the following signs: kicking, bucking, resisting leads, attitude problems, head tossing, difficult lateral bending or a lack of enthusiasm for performing. All of these issues might benefit from a massage.

HI: Why does my horse develop emotional or physical problems like those listed?

Wells: Although there are multiple reasons why your horse can develop behavior, strain and exertion problems, many can be traced back to stress on different areas of the horse's body.

Many riding disciplines and every-day things can create tension in the horse's muscle tissues, including weakness in an area from excessive use, poor or unsuitable conformation, or injury, which causes adjacent areas of the muscle to compensate. Other reasons why your horse may develop emotional and physical problems include: putting up the horse before he is properly cooled after exercise; placing too many demands on the horse's body when he hasn't been sufficiently warmed up prior to exercise; and mental and emotional stress.

These types of strain can also develop into injuries.

HI: What are some areas that typically have problems?

Wells: As I addressed in the video, the neck, shoulder, back and hindquarters typically demonstrate problems.

HI: How does massage help?

Wells: It stimulates the nervous system and muscle tone, increases blood flow and flexibility, eliminates metabolic wastes, encourages balance, relaxes muscles, promotes ease and well-being, and helps further bonding with your horse.

HI: What signs should people look for while massaging their horse to know it is helping?

Wells: To know that massage is helping, look for: softening of the eyes; licking; yawning; sighing; neck shaking; feel for softening of the tissue in the area you're massaging; and listen for stomach activity (digestive noise) and passing gas (or having a bowel movement). You will find throughout the massage that your horse will drop his head as his long back muscle relaxes — this is normal.

Please also be aware of the signs that signal the horse is experiencing pain in the area you're massaging. Watch for ears pinned back, squeals/grunts, lots of tail swishing, and strong negative reaction in the form of behavior or physical movement when you touch certain muscle groups.

HI: When shouldn't you massage your horse?

Wells: Massage is a preventative therapy and not a substitute for veterinary care. If your horse has a heart condition, an existing joint problem, injury, special medical concern or fever, consult your veterinarian before you massage your horse. If your vet is currently treating your horse for a condition, you don't want to upset the vet's course of action.

If your horse has a skin condition or growth — do not massage as the condition might spread. And if there are signs of pain, swelling or bleeding — do not massage. Call your vet.

HI: Does the massage atmosphere play a role in how my horse will react?

Wells: You should plan the massage for a time that is quiet — while this may not always be possible, be observant and you and your equine friend will have a more productive experience.

Make sure you remove any small animals or unattended children who could get hurt if your horse reacts suddenly. You can perform the massage in the stall, but a barn aisle is less confining. If someone will hold your horse for you, that's preferable. If you're alone, hold the lead line as needed.

Don't massage just before feeding time. After feeding and long before the next feeding is the preferable time to massage.

We'd like to thank Barb Wells for sharing her time and massage techniques. If you're ready to try equine massage with your horse, watch Wells at work in our exclusive HorseChannel.com video to learn some basic massage stroking techniques. Consult your vet before massaging your horse.

For more information about the J.F. Shea Therapeutic Riding Center, visit www.sheacenter.org

See more horse videos >>