Study shows ground pole work can improve joint motion in horses

Research out of Michigan State University suggests ground poles can be helpful for horses recovering from lameness.

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Ground poles are a common tool in many riders’ training arsenals. They can be helpful in introducing horses to jumping and fine-tuning their stride. They're essential for horses being prepared for trail or horsemanship classes. They can be used to help an uncoordinated horse develop strength and steadier gaits. New research suggests they can also be a valuable tool for horses returning to work after injury or lameness.

Research conducted at Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine and accepted for publication in the Equine Veterinary Journal offers some evidence supporting the use of ground poles as an aid for recovery. The researchers state that trotting over ground poles has historically been used to restore a full range of motion in horses, but no prior research offered quantitative evidence for the benefits of this practice.

Using a group of sound horses, the researchers observed the horses trotting on level ground, over low poles set at 11 cm and high poles set at 20 cm. They compared each horse's motion, including peak heights of the fore and hind hooves, over each of the levels.

The results showed that the peak heights of the hooves increased significantly with each increase in pole height, as would be expected. More significantly, all of the joints of the limbs showed increased flexion as the pole height was raised, meaning that it was the action of the joints and not increased suspension of the entire body as the horses trotted over the poles. This suggests that poles are an effective mechanism for activating the joints.

The researchers concluded that pole work could be helpful for strengthening the muscles used in flexing the joints. They also conclude that asking horses to work over poles requires horses to use visual cues (seeing the pole) to perform the physical action of stepping over the pole. This could be helpful for horses recovering from neurological issues.


Further Reading
Better Jumping with Ground Pole Exercises
Dressage Challenge Part I: Arena Workout
Arena Work for Trail Riders