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And Mans Best Friend

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Help to Improve Your Horse's Health and Wellbeing

Sue Palmer MCSP, Chartered Veterinary Physiotherapist

Since you are reading this article, it is automatically assumed that you are passionate about the health and well being of your horse. It is my belief that massage is something that we can all offer to our horses, and I wrote the book and DVD 'Horse Massage for Horse Owners' to encourage all horse owners to 'have a go' with confidence and enjoyment. First of all the horses love it, and secondly massage can reduce the risk of injury, pain or stiffness, improve performance, and above all, help maintain health and wellbeing.



Remember, you can massage your own horse on a regular basis, all you need is time, guidance, and a little practice.

'Massage is the practice of applying structured or unstructured pressure, tension, motion, or vibration — manually or with mechanical aids — to the soft tissues of the body, including muscles, connective tissue, tendons, ligaments, joints and lymphatic vessels to achieve a beneficial response.' (Wikipedia). Anyone can learn to massage their own horse. You don't need any qualifications or prior experience, or to be a particular type of person. Massage can be as gentle or as firm as you choose it to be, there is a type of massage to suit every person and every horse.

There is plenty of evidence to support massage as a therapeutic modality. In the human field, massage has been shown many times to be effective, especially when combined with exercise and advice. A study published in the Equine Veterinary Journal demonstrated the effectiveness of equine massage for decreasing pain.

Massage is something you can get started on straight away. A kind of stroking technique called effleurage is the basis of many forms of massage.

It's easy to learn, so why not have a go with your own horse? Decide on the area that you want to massage, perhaps the back muscles in the area under the saddle. Place the palm of your hand on the horse at the front of this area, and apply some pressure, the majority of it through the heel of your hand. Use a level of pressure that feels comfortable to you. Keeping the pressure on, slide your hand along the area you've chosen to massage. Feel the skin and muscles rippling along in front of your hand like a wave.

If your horse flinches away from the pressure, it might be that you've surprised him, or it might be that he's sore in which case you should contact a professional to assess him (your vet or Chartered Veterinary Physiotherapist is a good place to start). You should be able to massage the back muscles without causing pain, applying up to as much pressure as you would use to dent a football, as long as you press gradually rather than suddenly. You don't need to work this hard though to be of benefit to your horse. Practise on your own arm and see how lightly you can press and yet still feel an effect. Each person and each horse will have a level of pressure that they prefer, experiment to find what's right for you and your horse.

Another common technique is cupping, which is great for encouraging circulation to an area, and so can be important for providing energy to the muscles when warming up and encouraging lymphatic drainage during the cooling down process. Cup your hand so that the edges of your hand (little finger, tips of fingers, thumbs and heel of hand) comes into contact with the horse, trapping air within the palm of your hand. Working with both hands alternately in a steady rhythm, clap your hands against the muscle of the horse. Start very gently, and look for the ripples of skin and muscle that spread out from the area you connect with. A light touch is often more effective than a heavy hand, but each horse is an individual, so use a level of pressure that suits both you and your horse. This technique is similar to the 'strapping' that horses used to receive every day from their grooms (and still do in some of the best yards). You can use it anywhere that is muscular, for example over the quarters or the back muscles, but it could be painful if you use it over bony areas, for example the false hip (tuber coxae) or the top of the back (dorsal spinous processes).

It can be difficult deciding where to massage your horse, and in what direction to work. Developing a routine can improve your confidence and enjoyment in massaging your horse. It might help to remember that you are massaging the muscles that are underneath the skin, and to keep your focus on those rather than the skin and hair that your hand is touching. This means that it doesn't matter if you massage in the direction of, or against the hair, because it's not the hair you're massaging! If you've had a professional work with your horse, you may have an idea of where he's sore or tight, and you can concentrate on that area. However, try to develop a routine that covers the whole body. Start gently with the neck, work over the shoulders, down into the girth area and along the back, and then across the quarters. When you get it right your horse will relax, and the massage will be an enjoyable experience for both you and your horse.

There are many clues that suggest your horse might benefit from massage or physical therapy. For example, if your horse flinches away from the brush, it is almost certain that he has some sore areas.



If he is more difficult to work on one rein than the other, then the problem is more likely to be physical than behavioural (although it could be that you have the physical restriction rather than your horse!). If your horse has suddenly changed in his behaviour, for example he starts napping when he has previously enjoyed hacking out, then consider whether there might be a physical cause. These and many more are examples that might encourage you to try massaging to relieve soreness or tightness, or to call a professional to advise you how you could best help your horse.

Physiotherapy on animals (which in this case includes all kinds of manipulative therapy) is regulated by the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966.

This means that a therapist treating your horse should always have permission from your vet. If they don't ask for your vet's details, or ask you to contact the vet yourself, perhaps you might question why. There are many equine therapists available, and it can be difficult to know who to trust. Members of the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy are qualified to treat humans, and have trained further to qualify to treat animals. You can find your local Chartered Veterinary Physiotherapist at

www.acpat.co.uk.

Massage is beneficial for both you and your horse. It allows you to give something back in return for all that your horse gives you. You can monitor his physical wellbeing and recognise better when to call a professional to treat him. You can help to reduce pain and stiffness, and maintain good health. The more comfortable your horse is, the better his behaviour and / or performance is likely to be, and the more opportunities you will have to reward him, thus developing a positive cycle of further improved behaviour and / or performance.

www.horseandrurallifemagazines.co.uk

Massage is something that can be achieved and enjoyed by everyone.

All in all, learning to massage your horse is a great idea! The Horse Massage for Horse Owners Book and DVD is detailed yet easy to follow, teaching you a complete massage routine that you can use with your horse.

You can find out more at

www.thehorsephysio.co.uk.

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