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Core control

You've probably heard about core stability, but do you know why it's so important? Sue Palmer discusses the what, why and how of core stability for your horse

We've all heard of core stability, know it's helpful for our riding, and most of us know it's something vaguely relating to the strength of the muscles around our mid-section. Off the top of your head, you could probably name at least a few exercises to employ to improve it. But what about when training your horse?

As riders, we sit on the weakest point of our horses' backs, so it's important for this area to be properly supported by the muscular infrastructure. Just like in humans, the network of muscles around the spine and mid-section are called the core – and they can only function at their best if they're well-primed and your horse is comfortable enough to engage them. So, let's find out a little more.

Our expert



Sue Palmer MCSP is a chartered physiotherapist who's both ACPAT and RAMP registered. She's also a BHS Stage 3 Coach in Complete Horsemanship, BHSAI and Intelligent Horsemanship recommended trainer.

What's the core?

There are two main types of muscle in the body. They're classified as...

- **movement muscles** These tend to be close to the surface and cause one bone to move in relation to another and create motion. As an example, your biceps are movement muscles, causing your forearm to move in relation to the upper arm. They're designed to have relatively high power for a short period of time. Think of them as sprint muscles
- **stability muscles** These are much closer to the joints and stabilise rather than move them. One place these stability muscles are particularly important is along your spine. The muscles close to the vertebrae not only create movement, but also help

support your back and, subsequently, your spine. The stability muscles are designed to work at a relatively low power, for long periods of time.

They're like endurance muscles. Core stability muscles are the ones closest to the spine. They're especially important in the lower back – or the lumbar spine – where there's most opportunity for movement. They do exactly as they say – stabilise the core. Think of them like a corset or tin can supporting the spine.

This also reinforces the idea that the muscles wrap around the spine, and so they include those in front of it – our abdomen – as well as our back muscles. It's the multiple small muscles closest to the spine that we're talking about in terms of core stability.

Nowadays it's recognised that stability is perhaps not the best word because it suggests stillness, which isn't what's needed. What we need is better termed functional stability – our spine should be stable as we move, not just when we're standing, lying or sitting. In fact, it's even more important that our spine is stable when we're moving.

As a human, if you hurt your back, you have to work through rehabilitation exercises to regain core strength. The muscle function only returns fully if we remind the muscles what they're meant to do, which is why Pilates is recommended so often. But how can you do the same for your horse? Here I'll share two great groundwork exercises, and one you could reap rewards from either in-hand or under saddle. ➤

“As riders, we sit on the weakest point of our horses' backs, so it's important for that area to be properly supported”



In-hand: baited stretches

Baited stretches (more commonly known as carrot stretches) are one of the best-known exercises for building core strength in-hand and there are several studies showing that regular baited stretches improve the size of the muscles.

One of the most effective exercises you can do for core strength, they're also great because there isn't an enormous degree of skill involved. If your horse is bending and stretching to get a treat without moving his feet, then he'll be developing his core strength. I generally recommend encouraging your horse to reach towards his tail each side, and towards the ground between his front feet. You can add in lots more, though, including towards his...

- shoulder
- stifles
- saddle area
- front or back feet

If he moves his feet, try dialling back the stretch to make sure you're not asking for too difficult a movement to start with. If he seems to be habitually shifting, try standing him with his quarters in the corner of the stable, or alongside a fence or wall, to reduce his options.

A large part of baited stretches is the bait used – chopped carrots, apples and small treats can work well, but if your horse is starting to grab for treats, or you find him going to bite you because he's expecting a treat whenever he sees you, you might need to offer an alternative. Many handlers find handheld licks to be a better option, as they encourage the horse to stretch for longer and not jerk his neck for the reward – it'll reduce the risk of getting your fingers bitten, too.



In-hand: tail pull

The tail pull exercise is subtle, using gentle pressure. There should be no discomfort involved, and you should find that your horse relaxes into the exercise after a minute or two, if not immediately. Seek professional help if he doesn't, as this could be a sign of pain or discomfort. A horse who's uptight won't be engaging his muscles effectively – he'll be tensing those movement muscles getting ready to run, rather than using his stability muscles.

Standing directly behind your horse, take a hold of his tail. You can hold anywhere you like, from near the top of the tail, to right at the end. Use one or both hands, whichever is comfortable for you. Slowly and gently pull his weight backwards, using his tail as a lever, then gently release. His feet should stay still, and you should be able to watch his pelvis rocking back towards you and then away again. As his quarters move away from you, you may be able to see his lower back lift just slightly.

TOP TIP

Always take care when working behind your horse as this puts you in a high-risk zone. Wear a well fitted hat and sturdy boots for safety, and if at any point you feel this exercise doesn't suit you and your horse, then don't try it.

TOP TIP

Underlying pain issues can affect your horse's ability to build core strength. If you're at all worried about your horse, speak to your vet for their advice.

**TOP TIP**

Polework can be done in-hand as well as ridden. In fact, if your horse is likely to try and rush them while ridden, it might be best to start on the ground.

Ridden or in-hand: raised poles

There's been an explosion in polework lessons over the past few years, which is a great thing for horses. You can use poles flat on the ground or raise them – and you can choose to raise them at one end or both. There's benefit to using just one pole or several, scattered around randomly or in a set pattern. You can even ask your horse to walk over them in a straight line or on a circle, or to weave left and right around them.

Polework's effective because, as your horse steps over the poles, he has to lift his leg higher than usual. Try it yourself,

and you'll feel yourself engage your stomach muscles. The higher the pole, the more you need to use your core muscles, but only to a certain point. Beyond that, you twist your body to achieve the movement, instead. The same applies to your horse, too.

Focus on walk more than trot. Once your horse is trotting, he's using his ligaments as springs to help him move, alongside his muscles, so the core rewards won't be as hefty. In walk, it's largely muscle power that causes that leg to lift and that's exactly what you're looking for.

**TOP TIP**

If you and your horse aren't already working with a physical therapist, find one by looking up the Registered Animal Musculoskeletal Practitioners or the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy.

On core

There's so much you can do as an owner, handler or rider to help your horse build core stability. It doesn't have to be complicated, and it can be fun. Improving his core strength can help to improve behaviour, performance and results, as well as reducing the risk of pain and injury. So, why not give it a go? ■

