

Lunging for Increased Back Strength...

Your path to Suppleness and Flexibility

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In virtually all disciplines, peak performance depends on the horse's ability to drive deeply from the hindquarters, to round and lift its back, and to move freely up front. The key to beautiful, free movement is a properly conditioned horse with a strong back. Several things can adversely affect a horse's back, such as a poor-fitting saddle, slipping on bad ground, being out of alignment, or improperly conditioned back muscles. A horse suffering from back pain may experience decreased flexibility and a limited range of motion, and it may exhibit avoidance behavior and other performance-related issues. If your horse is showing any of these behaviors, it is important to get a thorough examination to diagnose and treat the animal's problems. The physical examination should include a thorough history, the visual inspection of top-line musculature for symmetrical or asymmetrical muscle atrophy, the palpation of bony spinous pain or back muscle pain, and an evaluation of the horse's

movement in a straight line and in both directions on a lunge line. The veterinarian may determine that the horse needs further diagnostic assessment that may include x-rays, ultrasound, or the use of other diagnostic imaging tools. Once a diagnosis is made, a treatment plan will be tailored to the individual horse and may include chiropractic, acupuncture, magnawave, shockwave, injections of the back muscles or articular processes, systemic anti-inflammatories, or muscle relaxers. After the primary condition is diagnosed and treated, prevention of further back soreness is crucial. Long periods of rest for a horse with back problems are not recommended because this could lead to loss of valuable epaxial muscle tone, persistent back pain, and possibly slow the horse's return to work.

Adhering to a tailored rehabilitation and exercise management program is very important for ensuring a complete and speedy recovery from a back injury or back pain. After the initial work up and treatment on the horse is completed by a veterinarian, an individualized rehabilitation protocol for the horse should be prescribed. Often a painful horse will need an exercise program that involves a "workout" without carrying the weight of a rider or constricting tack. The key to developing strong back (epaxial) muscles is an effective lunging program. Such a program requires minimal equipment, and a committed owner/trainer that is willing to follow a specific workout schedule. An effective lunging protocol requires a neck stretcher (elastic reins), a non-constricting surcingle, a snaffle bit, lunge line, a large area with good footing, and a watch or clock. The following lunging/back conditioning program was adapted from Dr. Audrey DeClue and Dr. Bob Racich of Lake View Equine Veterinary Clinic in Roberts, Wisconsin.

- 1. Week One:** Lunge your horse daily with a surcingle set (not tight) and a neck stretcher (elastic reins), and a snaffle bit. Set the reins at the sides of the surcingle or between the horse's front legs. Try to achieve a head position PERPENDICULAR to the ground, but don't demand a head set that is uncomfortable for the horse. Encourage the horse to long trot in both directions until slightly sweating. To prevent straining tendons or ligaments, be sure to lunge in as large a circle as possible and change directions every 5 minutes. Cantering is also acceptable, but the main goal is for the horse to move deeply, not fast. The purpose of the neck stretcher is to encourage the horse to flex at the poll, to lift its withers and to flex its back. By moving in frame, without a constricting saddle, or the weight of a rider, the horse should develop stronger back muscles.
- 2. Week Two:** Same as week one; however, after lunging, you may ride the horse lightly, at a long trot and low head set. No lateral, collected, or tight circle work. Large circles and straight lines are the best.
- 3. Week Three:** Same as week two; lunge first, then ride until a good warm-up is accomplished. Then progress back to regular work level.

Ground driving with long lines is a good alternative to lunging, but requires a higher skill level by the handler. A Pessoa Rig will also work in replacement of the neck stretcher. The neck stretcher (elastic reins) can be purchased from most equine supply catalogs for around \$20. The neck stretcher is a simple aid that ensures proper head and neck carriage and encourages effective use of the back. The elastic reins have an adjustable piece above the poll, run down through the snaffle bit and hook



under the horse's legs. The main pressure point is above the poll, which promotes proper neck and back flexion. Unlike side reins, that put pressure at the corners of the mouth, the elastic reins simply run through the bit and use the mouth as a fulcrum, rather than as a direct pressure

point.

The horse should have regular evaluations by a properly trained professional to monitor the response to the rehabilitation exercise program. A positive response to this rehabilitation lunging program is the improvement of the top line

musculature, decreased pain on palpation of the spine and back, and increased suppleness and flexibility during lunging. A strong, well developed back will lead to a happier horse that is more flexible and able to perform maneuvers with the desired movement when ridden.



PHOTO, page 28 - The head shot shows how to set up the neck stretcher with a snaffle bit, and the adjustable piece above the poll. You can also leave a halter or cavason on under the bridle to hook the lunge line to.

PHOTO, at left - This photo demonstrates how to hook the neck stretcher between the front legs to the bottom of the surcingle. If the surcingle does not have a hook on the bottom, you can make a loop out of string, leather, or twine and put the surcingle girth through the loop, so that you have something to hook to.