

What is essential exercise for horses?



Horses require lots of daily exercise because they are essentially grazing athletes. When you own a horse you need to know that exercise is a very important part of caring for a horse. It is not acceptable to keep horses confined in yards or stables without providing lots of opportunities for movement. Horses that live at pasture with other horses in a herd will exercise themselves if the paddock has good pasture. This is because pasture makes horses move. Horses have to keep walking in order to continuously find new plants. Horses that are kept in yards or stables must either be turned out daily onto pasture

(preferably with other horses) or a large area (again preferably with other horses) so that they are able to not only move, but interact socially with other horses. Horses that are turned out alone – even if it is in a pasture with good grazing – tend to spend more time standing around (usually where they can see other horses) rather than grazing (and therefore walking sufficiently).



A horse is naturally a very active animal. In the feral/wild situation horses cover many kilometres a day (on average between 30km – 80km). They travel between where the water is and where feed

While horse are grazing they are also exercising.

is (grassland pasture). The feed near to the water hole is eaten out first so for much of the year horses have to travel quite a distance to obtain the variety of plants that they need to keep them healthy. This keeps them moving on an almost constant basis.

When we keep horses in captivity they usually do not get enough exercise because it is difficult to provide the actual space required by a horse. We would need to have several hundred acres available for horse keeping if we want to keep horses 'naturally'. It is

**Owning a horse is a big responsibility. You need to understand about good horse management, horse behaviour *and* correct feeding etc. and use this information to provide what is necessary to keep a horse healthy and happy. Owning and caring for a horse properly is time consuming and expensive so make sure you are able to provide what a horse needs before you take on the responsibility.**

**Please remember**

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however possible to do a good job of keeping horses in captivity without having so much land as long as you understand why movement is so important to a horse and how much a horse needs to move. You can then attempt to provide the right conditions so that the horse can move as much as possible.

The best form of exercise is lots of slow steady movement which is what horses do when grazing. Occasional bursts of speed are also good for horses. A healthy horse does this regularly because it is part of normal horse behaviour therefore healthy horses will do this voluntarily on a regular basis when turned out together in a paddock. Paddocks need to be safe enough so that horses can move fast without injuring themselves. For example this is why paddocks with rounded corners are better than square corners for groups of horses. The rounded corners keep the fast moving animals moving *around* a corner rather than into it. See our publication [Horse property fences and gates \(2011\)](#) for more information about how to fence paddocks safely.



Horses need to be encouraged to move as much as possible. We can do this by designing our property so that it keeps horses moving.

Horses rely on movement to keep their circulation working properly (both blood circulation and lymphatic fluid circulation). Every step a horse takes helps to keep their circulation working by 'pumping' fluid back up the legs. The hoof of the horse has evolved to expand to absorb the downward pressure of the horse (as the hoof touches the ground) and contract to help push fluid upwards again as the hoof leaves the ground. Horses that do not move enough tend to develop 'filled legs' which is where the lower legs fill with fluid due to the horse standing still for too long. This usually disappears once the horse is exercised. Horses will not move just for the sake of it



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(even though it is good for them) unless they are grazing or are being exercised. For example if you turn a horse out for the day into a bare paddock he or she may run around for a few minutes to get rid of the excess energy that has built up from standing in a yard or stable over night but then they will stand around waiting to be fed/let back in. As mentioned before they will also tend to stand around even if there is pasture to eat if they are turned out alone. The best way to get horses moving is to turn them out to graze with other horses. They will then walk steadily for several hours. This is the most ideal form of basic exercise for a horse.

If you need to restrict the horse's access to pasture (i.e. the horse is overweight/laminitic etc.) or you do not have enough pasture you can still encourage the horse to move more by spreading out the hay in a yard. In the case of a laminitic horse you should not force movement until the horse is no longer in pain (your vet/farrier will tell you when). You may be able to utilise a laneway or driveway and put the hay at one end and the water at the other so that the horse has to move between the two. In the case of restricted pasture access (for whatever reason) you also need to create regular structured exercise for your horse which can be either lunging, riding, leading in hand, leading from another horse, driving (in harness) etc.

See our publications [Horse property planning \(2011\)](#) and [Stables, shelters and yards \(2011\)](#) for ideas about how you can design your property so that horses move more.



**If you keep your horse yarded or stabled you need to have time to exercise the horse daily and the time spent doing this is on top of the extra time that it takes to care for a confined horse (more mucking out etc.) so keep in mind that as well as being an unnatural environment for a horse you are creating extra work for yourself. Think carefully about how you keep your horse, think about creating the best possible situation for all concerned rather than just doing something because everyone else does it. If you are interested in learning more about this subject see our [Sustainable Horsekeeping series](#).**

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