



SPRING CONDITIONING



Now that spring is here and the days are warmer, we get a lot of questions from horse owners on how to safely bring their horses back to work and achieve the expected level of competition this summer.

There are various aspects of conditioning that you will need to assure for a proper return to work. If a horse was two or more months with reduced or no activity, their condition is lost. Even if the horse was kept outside in a large paddock during the winter, they do little more than eat and walk. Different aspects you need to consider include a health check with your veterinarian, a foot check with your farrier, and a training plan that gradually increases exercise to avoid injuries. Appropriate nutrition also needs to be adjusted to gradually change as the level of exercise increases.

One of the questions we regularly have is if my horse is healthy, why would I need a health check with my veterinarian this spring?



During a health examination, veterinarians will focus on aspects that can sometimes be hidden to untrained eyes or that will need of special equipment or procedures to be recognized. During a spring health check, you might request your veterinarian to assure that your horse has no current lameness issues that will need to be addressed before starting spring conditioning. A soundness exam can reveal issues that might have occurred during winter and that can turn into serious if the horse returns to regular training. Also, your veterinarian should check your horse's teeth, heart and skin condition, body condition score and attitude. A quick tooth check can be very useful in identifying issues. If there are any concerns, your veterinarian may need to sedate your horse to do a full dental exam and float.

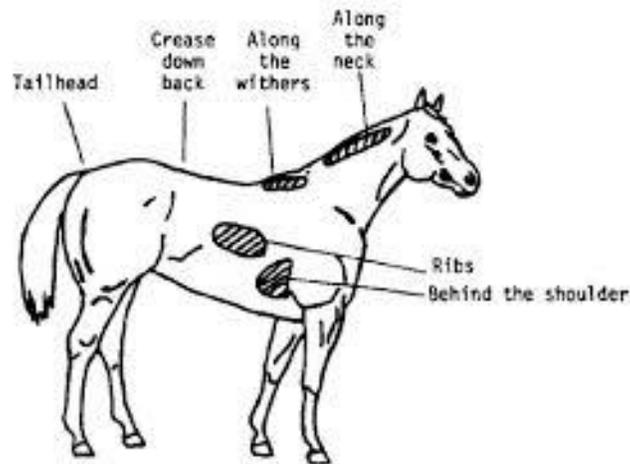
Vaccination and deworming are needed in your spring vet exam. It is important to have your vaccines up-to-date before you take your horse to a different facility and there is contact with new horses. The majority of diseases that we recommend vaccinating for can be very detrimental or even fatal to your horse. These include Influenza and Rhinopneumonitis that can keep a horse off work for 6-8 weeks (remember that in Canada our summer is very short and 6 weeks is almost half of summer time!); to more serious diseases like Tetanus, Encephalomyelitis (Eastern and Western) and West Nile. In other provinces like Ontario, Rabies vaccination is obligatory. In Alberta this vaccine is not a prerequisite, but we do recommend it as horses can contract rabies from wild animals which can carry rabies. Due to the increase presence of EIA in North America some facilities, clinics and events will require a negative Coggins Certificate (Equine Infectious Anemia) to attend or board at, and a spring vet exam could be the perfect time to obtain one.



Rigid deworming schedules with or without dewormer rotation are not recommended anymore. We know now that these schedules induce parasite resistance. I have seen several farms that are now affected by parasites that are resistant to all of our dewormers. Therefore, now deworming is best recommended after your horse is evaluated for the amount of parasite eggs he is currently shedding. This is done with a simple examination of his feces. You just need to provide your veterinarian with a small amount of fresh feces from your horse. This can also be done during your horse spring veterinary exam. Be aware some parasites such as bots and pin worms are not found in fecal floats.



Assessing the body condition of the horse before starting intensive training is also recommended. If your horse is overweight a different diet or exercise regime might need to be recommended. The same occurs with an underweight horse that might need specific supplements to handle increased exercise. Feeding changes should be done gradually. A horse's gastrointestinal tract has a variety of favorable bacteria that helps the horse process their forage. Bacteria populations need to adapt to new feeding regimes. Some horses are very sensitive to hay or grain changes and we usually recommend a gradual change of about 20-25% of the current feed every other day. This way the change will take around 8-10 days, which is usually enough time for bacterial populations to adapt to the new feeding regime.



With the sun warming up and melting our white snow, we are more likely to start exercising our horses outside and riding them more frequently. Horses also will be excited about going out for that first spring ride as you are. But it is important to not confuse that eagerness with fitness. If we over exercise our horse, in a day or two muscle aches will occur. In the horse world this is called "tying-up" or "exertional rhabdomyolysis". Due to the great amount of musculature in the horse's body, exertional rhabdomyolysis can be very detrimental and even fatal to the horse. Therefore, carefully introducing exercise with help from your veterinarian and trainer is very important to avoid serious complications.

In summary, when conditioning your horse this spring, be sure he/she is healthy and up-to-date with vaccinations, deworming, dental conditions, feeding regimes are adequate and changes made progressively, as well as reintroducing exercise gradually without overestimating our horse's fitness.

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