If your horse is unsound, for instance your horse may kick or bite if they don’t like the exercise. All horses may kick or bite if they don’t like the exercise.

Abdominal muscles
Cold connective tissues, which have low blood saturation, can be more susceptible to injury. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that your horse is warm before completing any of these exercises. “Never attempt to stretch cold muscles,” Gillian says. “It can improve posture, achieve a balance between strength and flexibility, and relieve tension. Many principles of Pilates can be applied to horses. Core stability and strength are as important to horses as they are to riders. Maintaining stability, posture and balance can contribute to more effective training, improved performance and reduce the risk of injury.”

There are two main types of stretching, Gillian explains. “Passive” stretches are performed by the handler. Your horse needs to feel relaxed and confident to achieve these stretches properly. “Active” stretches require active muscle contraction from the horse to move body parts and create the stretch himself. Active stretches can be performed during ridden or groundwork exercises and also with food rewards, such as carrots.

The most important thing to remember when stretching your horse or pony is that cold connective tissues, which have low blood saturation, can be more susceptible to injury. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that your horse is warm. Never attempt to stretch cold muscles.

HOW TO STRETCH
1. Begin slowly. Unless otherwise stated, once the maximum muscle fibres to relax before taking the stretch further.
2. Work a manageable programme into your daily routine.
3. Be patient. You will only see the benefits of stretching if you perform the stretches regularly and consistently.

STRETCHING CAN
Increase stride length, range of movement, engagement, flexibility, athleticism and suppleness. Reduce muscular soreness, tension and stiffness. Reduce the risk of injury to joints, muscles and tendons. Improve coordination. Maintain the current level of flexibility. Increase mental and physical relaxation. Increase circulation. Enhance body awareness.

“Working on the principle that most people will forget or not be able to manage these exercises once or twice a week, I find the best way is to try and fit the exercises into your daily routine rather than trying to set aside a certain amount of time each day,” Gillian advises.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS
• Cold connective tissues, which have low blood saturation, can be more susceptible to injury. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that your horse is warm. Never attempt to stretch cold muscles.
• If your horse is unsound, for instance your horse has recently sustained an injury, stretching may be inappropriate. Seek professional advice before commencing a stretching program with your horse.
• If in doubt during any of these exercises, seek assistance from your veterinarian and take advice from a therapist. They will assess your horse’s musculature and plan a suitable program of stretches. They can also show you how to perform stretches safely without risk to either yourself or your horse.
• All horses may kick or bite if they don’t like the exercise. Only perform a stretch if you have confidence in yourself and your horse.

SPINNING
AIM
1. To stimulate the spine by creating lateral bend throughout the horse’s body
2. To encourage adduction of the inside hind leg

HOW TO DO IT
1. Stand your horse on a non-slip surface.
2. Stand facing your horse at the girth line. Hold the lead rope in the hand nearest the head, leaving the other hand free to encourage movement of the hind legs.
3. Encourage your horse to walk in a small circle around you, bending his head to the inside. Do not allow him to step backwards.
4. Gently touch his inside hing leg just as it leaves the ground to encourage him to step further underneath his body.

TIP
This exercise requires a certain amount of skill and practice from both horse and handler. Perform during your daily routine to improve the quality of the steps.

Keep your horse walking forwards evenly on a small circle. He must not pivot around his front feet nor step backwards. If this happens, ask him to walk round in a slightly larger circle then spiral in again. Try to keep your horse stepping at the speed of a positive, marching walk.

This exercise is good for improving suppleness, bend and lateral movements.

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WALKING OBLIQUELY OVER A RAISED POLE

AIM
1. To lift and flex the back, hip, shoulder, elbow, stifle and hock
2. To strengthen the muscles and structures involved in engagement, hip flexion and pelvic stability
3. To improve suppleness and flexibility through the shoulder, elbow, hip, stifle and hock
4. To strengthen the muscles involved in abduction and adduction

HOW TO DO IT
1. Begin with a pole on the ground.
2. Gradually raise it until it is around knee height.
3. Walk diagonally across the pole, encouraging your horse to keep his head low.
4. Gradually increase the angle of approach.
5. This exercise can be performed in hand or under saddle, and on a daily basis.

TIP
Perform this exercise on both reins.

This exercise is good for improving suppleness and range of movement in the joints and muscles involved in lateral exercises.

HIND LIMB RETRACTION STRETCH

AIM
1. To stretch the muscles involved in the protraction of the hind leg and during engagement

HOW TO DO IT
1. Stand next to the hindquarters, facing the tail.
2. Pick up the hoof and hold the leg in a flexed position until you feel your horse relax and allow you to take his weight.
3. Place his leg on your thigh and then gradually encourage your horse to stretch his leg out behind him. (Using your legs, rather than your upper body, will help to protect your back.)
4. Encourage your horse to extend his hock joint by pressing gently on the ligament above the point of hock.
5. Encourage your horse to hold this position for 5-10 seconds.
6. Repeat three times.

TIP
A good time to perform this exercise is immediately after your horse has worked. Only ask for a small stretch to start with, gradually increasing over several days. It may take time for your horse to develop the skill and confidence to use this opportunity to stretch. Remember to protect your back during this exercise by considering your posture.

This exercise is good for young horses to help them develop proprioception, stretching out the muscles to help alleviate stiffness behind and increasing stride length. It is a particularly good stretch for horses that spend a lot of time in a collected or shortened frame.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gillian Higgins, a sports and remedial therapist and event rider based in the UK, works with horses and riders from all disciplines. After realising that many horse owners could benefit from a deeper understanding of how their horse works, Gillian developed Horses Inside Out, an organisation providing insight into equine locomotion, training and management from an anatomical perspective.

NEXT MONTH
Don’t miss next month’s issue of Horses and People Magazine where Gillian will continue this Pilates series with more stretching exercises to increase the strength and suppleness of the fore limb.