

Help! Our turnout is limited

OUR EXPERT PANEL



JENNIFER TAYLOR
Jennifer is a qualified physiotherapist and treats elite human athletes – including riders – as well as horses. She has a BSc (Hons) in Physiotherapy, an MSc in Sports and Exercise Medicine and a PG Dip in Veterinary Physiotherapy. Jennifer covers the North West and North Wales. Visit: www.pegasusphysiotherapy.co.uk



JUSTINE HARRISON
Justine is a certified equine behaviourist who applies the science of behaviour and learning to help owners solve a wide range of issues with their horses. She is the UK chair of the International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants. Visit: www.equinebehaviourist.co.uk



Stable toys can help keep a horse entertained

Q My yard owner has decided to rest the majority of their paddocks until spring and my horse now only has a few hours of turnout on alternate days. Can you suggest anything that I can do to keep him fit and occupied for the next few months?

Name and address withheld

JUSTINE SAYS Winter can be a difficult time for horses and their owners. Many yards restrict turnout to rest their land and if this happens you need to ensure your horse has plenty of things to keep him occupied and prevent boredom if he's stabled for hours on end. Here's a few ideas...

1. Feed a variety of ad-lib forage

Restricting forage can affect a horse both mentally and physically. Providing plenty of good quality forage will keep him occupied and his digestive system working effectively. Ideally, offer him a choice of different forages at ground level as this will simulate natural grazing behaviour.

2. Give him equine company

Horses rely on other equines for friendship, shared vigilance and security, so make sure yours can socialise as often as possible. Ideally, put him in him a stable where he can touch, interact and mutually groom with an equine friend over the wall.

3. Let him play

Horses love to play and stable toys can help to entertain them and alleviate boredom if they're indoors for long periods. There's a huge range of toys available including balls that trickle-feed grass nuts when nudged, giant balls with handles to throw around and edible toys on ropes. You can also get creative and make your own – towels and staple-free cardboard boxes with treats hidden inside them can make great toys. You could also see if your horse enjoys apple bobbing in his water bucket!

4. Spend quality time with your horse

Take the opportunity to spend some quiet time with your horse and get to know him better. Groom him, massage him and find his favourite itchy spots – you'll know you have found the right spot when his nose starts twitching or he tries to return the favour by scratching you back with his teeth! Sit with him and read a book in his stable – he will really appreciate the company and it could also improve the relationship between you.

5. Visiting hours

If your horse has a friend who can't be stabled nearby, then see if you can bring them to visit him once a day, or a couple of times a week. Let them mutually groom over the door and hang a haynet outside your horse's stable so his friend can hang out with him and keep him company.

6. Change his environment

If there's a spare loosebox on the yard, arrange for your horse to swap stables for part of his day to give him a change of scene. You can also tie him up on different parts of the yard with a carrot studded haynet or a forage box (see below) to keep him occupied.

7. Make a forage box

Create a forage box to entertain your horse, either in the stable or when he's tied up. Half-fill a large, strong bucket or crate with horse-safe toys – large dog toys, rubber balls and rings are ideal. Scatter grass nuts, vegetable strips or high-fibre treats in the bottom of the box or bucket and pour a little diluted apple or carrot juice over the top.



If your horse has to spend more time indoors, keep him flexible by performing carrot stretches (below)



JEN SAYS When the weather is bad, lots of yards may limit turnout, and combined with dark evenings and limited time to ride, it can mean reduced physical activity for your horse. Luckily, there are several things you can do to help counteract this reduction in his activity levels. Massages, stretches and in-hand work can all help to maintain your horse's flexibility and strength. Always consider both your own and your horse's safety before doing any of these exercises.

1. Massage.

Using the palm of your hand with relaxed fingers, follow the natural contours of the muscle down from the poll along the neck to the shoulder, into the girth area, along the withers into the topline muscles and over the gluteal muscles into the hamstrings. Gradually increase the pressure you apply. If you are unsure about massage there are many massage mitts on the market you can use, or just spend more time grooming.

If you touch any areas which your horse reacts to (for example, biting, kicking, putting his ears back, for example) stop immediately. Ask your vet to examine your horse, who may refer him to a physiotherapist.

Use the time when massaging your horse to feel the legs for any swellings or heat and to check the condition of his feet.

2. Stretches.

Carrot stretches help with flexibility and can also benefit neck and back muscle strength. Some horses may get nippy and demanding when you start doing stretches, and if so, try only giving your horse treats out of a treat bag. Then it's clear when food is available and he won't mug you at other times.

My favourite way of doing these stretches is to use a hand-held lick – not only do your fingers stay safe, the horse isn't tempted to snatch the treat and they can hold the stretches for longer.

To improve neck flexibility, ask your horse to bend his head around to the girth area, then the back of saddle region, point of hip and, if he's able, towards his stifle or hock. Asking him to stretch down to his chest, in between his knees and feet and to the outside of each foot are brilliant for stretching the spine and using the abdominal muscles.

If you notice any restrictions or painful responses when stretching stop immediately, and book an ACPAT Veterinary Physiotherapist to assess your horse.

3. In-hand exercises.

If you are struggling to ride during the week, taking your horse for a walk can be a good way to stretch his legs. Incorporating hills and varying terrain into your route can help make

his muscles work differently to standing on a flat floor.

Pole work in the arena is brilliant as an alternative to riding, and you can include raised poles, caveletti and grids. Long-reining is also a good option.

Many people, when on limited turnout, use their indoor or outdoor arena to let their horses run around. I am slightly cautious of this for a few reasons. Firstly, the surface can be unstable if a horse starts to race around. Secondly, the horse then associates playtime with the arena and may transfer this behaviour to when being ridden.

Lungeing, with or without aids, is also commonly used to help maintain a horse's fitness. Short periods for a well-balanced horse are useful, however long periods just provide repetitive forces in a circle for their legs. If a horse is not used to being lunged, is unbalanced or tense, start with just a few minutes and gradually increase the time over subsequent sessions. ■