

# RIDER WARM-UP & STRETCH GUIDE

Prepare your body • find your balance • start your ride with intention

## WHY WARM UP THE RIDER?

We wouldn't expect our horse to go straight from standing to demanding physical work. We give them time to wake up, move through their body and gradually prepare for the work ahead. So why do we so often expect the rider to climb straight into the saddle and get going?

Riding is physical exercise too. Your hips need to move, your pelvis needs to balance, your shoulders need to remain mobile, your legs need to respond independently and your hands need to be soft and responsive.

A few minutes of preparation can help you arrive in the saddle feeling more mobile, more balanced and more connected to your own body.

And yes... it might also help reduce the chances of spending the following two days walking around like a cowboy! Because apparently that is still considered a perfectly normal post-lesson condition in the horse world.



## THE SURESTRIDE APPROACH

This is a gentle pre-ride mobility and warm-up routine, not a test of flexibility. Move smoothly, stay within a comfortable range and never force a movement. The aim is to wake the body up — not exhaust it before you even reach the mounting block.

## A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

If you have an injury, ongoing pain, a medical condition, are pregnant, have recently had surgery or are unsure whether an exercise is appropriate for you, seek individual advice from an appropriate healthcare professional first. Stop if an exercise causes pain or makes you feel unwell. These are general preparation exercises, not treatment.

## THE ROUTINE AT A GLANCE

- ☐ 1. Breathe   ☐ 2. Neck   ☐ 3. Shoulders & chest   ☐ 4. Upper back
- ☐ 5. Hips   ☐ 6. Hamstrings & calves   ☐ 7. Ankles   ☐ 8. Hands & fingers
- ☐ 9. Three calming breaths   ☐ 10. Mount and ride

## START HERE

### 1. BREATHE — ARRIVE IN YOUR BODY

Before you ask your body to move, give yourself a moment to arrive. The BHS Riding Fit material includes mindful breathing as part of rider preparation, alongside rider alignment and physical fitness.

#### 1. Three slow breaths

**Why:** A simple way to pause, settle your attention and begin the routine without rushing.

**How:**

- Stand comfortably with your feet about hip-width apart.
- Let your knees soften and allow your shoulders to relax.
- Breathe in gently through your nose.
- Take a slow, comfortable breath out and let your shoulders drop.
- Repeat for three breaths.

Try: 3 slow breaths, with the exhale a little longer than the inhale if comfortable.

**Rider note:** Don't try to take enormous breaths. Comfortable and unforced is the goal.

### 2. NECK — LOOK AROUND, DON'T CRANK

#### 2. Gentle neck mobility

**Why:** Riders need freedom to look, orientate and maintain a relaxed upper body. NHS flexibility guidance includes gentle neck rotations and side-to-side neck mobility.

**How:**

- Start tall with your shoulders relaxed.
- Slowly turn your head to look towards one shoulder, then return to centre.
- Repeat to the other side.
- Gently nod your chin towards your chest and return to neutral.
- If comfortable, gently bring one ear towards the same-side shoulder; return to centre and change sides.

Try: 3-5 slow repetitions each direction. Keep the movement comfortable.

**Rider note:** No pulling on the head and no forcing the range.

### 3. SHOULDERS & CHEST — OPEN, DON'T PIN

#### 3. Shoulder rolls + arm circles

**Why:** Shoulder mobility can help you explore a relaxed, open upper-body position rather than simply trying to 'pin' the shoulders back.

**How:**

- Let the arms hang loosely.
- Roll the shoulders up, back and down, then reverse the direction.
- Make small arm circles, gradually becoming a little larger.
- Open the arms gently out to the sides, then return them to neutral.

Try: 5 shoulder rolls each direction + 5 small-to-larger arm circles each way.

**Rider note:** Think 'wide collarbones and soft shoulders', not 'squeeze shoulder blades together'.

### 4. UPPER BACK & CHEST — LET THE THORACIC SPINE MOVE

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#### 4. Reach, open & gentle rotation

**Why:** The BHS specifically highlights rider posture, biomechanics, shoulder mobility and symmetry as useful areas for riders to work on.

**How:**

- Reach both arms forward comfortably, then open them out to the sides.
- Cross your arms lightly over your chest.
- Rotate your upper body gently to one side, return to centre, then the other side.
- Keep the movement smooth rather than trying to reach a maximum twist.

**Try:** 4-5 rotations each side.

**Rider note:** Let the movement come from the upper back while the hips stay comfortable and stable.

## THE RIDER'S CENTRE

### 5. HIPS — FREE THE RIDER'S CENTRE

Riders need flexibility and balance on both sides of the body. The BHS notes that muscle tightness can restrict the rider's ability to move in harmony with the horse and specifically identifies tight hip flexors as one possible contributor to lower-back discomfort. Its Riding Fit material also teaches hip mobilisation.

#### 5. Hip circles

**Why:** A simple way to introduce movement around the pelvis and hips before you get on.

**How:**

- Place your hands lightly on your hips.
- Make small circles with your pelvis.
- Gradually make the circles a little larger if they feel comfortable.
- Reverse the direction.

**Try:** 5 circles each direction.

**Rider note:** Keep your feet planted and avoid forcing the range.

#### 6. Standing hip-flexor mobilisation

**Why:** The iliopsoas is part of the hip-flexor group. This gentle active movement prepares the front of the hip without turning the warm-up into a long static stretch.

**How:**

- Stand in a comfortable split stance with one foot in front of the other.
- Soften the front knee and gently allow your pelvis to travel forwards a small amount.
- Return to your starting position.
- Repeat, then change sides.

**Try:** 5-6 gentle repetitions each side.

**Rider note:** Think 'length through the front of the hip' rather than pushing hard into a stretch.

#### 7. Leg swings — forward & back

**Why:** Dynamic leg swings bring movement into the hip without asking for a deep static stretch.

**How:**

- Hold a secure support such as a stable post or rail.
- Swing one leg gently forward and back like a pendulum.
- Keep the movement relaxed and controlled.
- Change legs.

**Try:** 8 swings each leg, then repeat side-to-side if comfortable.

**Rider note:** Start small. The range can grow as the hip warms.

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#### 8. Gentle hip rotation

**Why:** Independent hip movement is important to a rider's ability to allow the leg and pelvis to move rather than bracing the whole body together.

**How:**

- Hold a secure support.
- Lift one knee a little.
- Gently rotate the hip in and out through a small, comfortable range.
- Lower the foot and change sides.

**Try:** 4-5 controlled rotations each way per side.

**Rider note:** Small and controlled beats big and wobbly.

## LOWER LEG + REINS

### 6. HAMSTRINGS & CALVES

#### 9. Hamstring sweep

**Why:** The aim here is gentle movement through the back of the thigh rather than a deep pre-ride stretch.

**How:**

- Place one heel slightly forward with the toes pointing upwards.
- Keep the spine long and gently hinge from the hips.
- Return to standing and change sides.

**Try:** 5 gentle sweeps each side.

**Rider note:** Don't round aggressively through the lower back to reach further.

#### 10. Calf raises

**Why:** Calf strength and ankle mobility contribute to how the lower leg works in the stirrup.

**How:**

- Stand tall with something stable nearby if needed.
- Rise smoothly onto the balls of your feet.
- Lower with control.

**Try:** 8–10 repetitions.

**Rider note:** Keep the movement steady rather than bouncing.

#### 11. Calf & ankle mobility

**Why:** The ankle needs to move freely enough for the lower leg to stay responsive without unnecessary stiffness.

**How:**

- Step one foot slightly forward while keeping the heel grounded.
- Gently allow the front knee to travel towards the toes, then back.
- Change sides.

**Try:** 6–8 gentle repetitions each side.

**Rider note:** Keep the foot pointing comfortably forwards and don't force the knee further than feels natural.

### 7. ANKLES — FIND YOUR FOOT

#### 12. Ankle circles + heel-to-toe rocks

**Why:** Ankle circles are a simple mobility exercise used in NHS exercise programmes, and ankle mobility is useful preparation for the rider's lower leg and foot.

**How:**

- Lift one foot slightly and make slow ankle circles.
- Reverse the direction, then change feet.
- Finish with gentle heel-to-toe rocking while standing.

**Try:** 5 circles each direction per ankle + 8 heel-to-toe rocks.

**Rider note:** Notice the contact of your big toe, little toe and heel with the ground.

### 8. HANDS & FINGERS — LAST, SO THEY STAY WARM

We've deliberately put the hands last. You want these movements to be fresh in your body immediately before you pick up the reins.

### 13. Soft hands routine

**Why:** Hands that are warm and mobile are better prepared for the small, precise movements riding asks of them.

**How:**

- Gently make a fist, then spread your fingers wide.
- Wave the fingers one at a time, curling and straightening them.
- Circle the wrists both ways.
- With elbows relaxed by your sides, rotate the forearms so the palms face up, then down.
- Finally, close the fingers gently as though holding reins — without gripping.

Try: 10 open/close repetitions + 5 wrist circles each way + 8 palm-up/palm-down rotations.

**Rider note:** Finish with the 'soft hand' check: can you hold imaginary reins without clenching your fingers?

**“Prepare your body. Find your balance. Give yourself and your horse the best chance to work together.”**

### SOURCES & FURTHER READING

This guide draws on general rider-fitness and exercise guidance from the British Horse Society and NHS, including BHS guidance on rider flexibility, posture, hip and shoulder mobility, symmetry and warming up before riding; and NHS guidance on general warm-up, mobility and exercise safety. It is a general educational resource and does not replace personalised assessment or medical advice.

British Horse Society — Rider fitness; Riding Fit. NHS — How to warm up before exercising; Flexibility exercises; exercise safety guidance.