



FEELING YOUR HORSE BY HAND

*A guide for when you want to get
in touch with and take care of your
horse in the best possible way.*

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WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This is for you when you want to...

- become more familiar with your horse's body and physical condition.
- understand your horse's behaviour better.
- connect with your horse on a deeper level.
- have a better idea of how your horse is feeling.

WHAT WILL I LEARN?

In this guide you will learn how you can increase your knowledge of your horse's well-being.

Learn the benefits of using your hands to feel your horse – this technique is called palpation.

Understand how little effort it takes to gain a deeper understanding of your horse's condition.

You don't need any special equipment and anyone can use the techniques described in this guide.

YOUR HORSE'S WELL-BEING

Making big sacrifices is often a no-brainer when we want to keep our four-legged friends healthy and happy.

But I think we often forget how simple it is to monitor the well-being of your horse on a daily basis – just by using one of the most traditional methods: touch.

We'll often limit examination to the areas we know are troublesome – and horses with hoof problems even get their feet checked by different people – but we tend to forget the big picture.

By running your soft hands all over your horse's body, you'll learn to recognise changes in a much more profound way than by just grooming him with brushes.

Feeling your horse by hand, from his muzzle to his coronets, will allow you to detect any changes or problems early on, when the issues are still small and easily treatable.

Sudden but small changes in temperature, cuts and scrapes as well as tension and sore muscles will come to your attention before they ever have a chance to become big, complicated problems.

Most of the changes that you'll detect are temporary and only require short-term follow-up – but sometimes you'll discover something more serious that requires larger intervention.



WHAT IS PALPATION?

Palpation and massage are not the same thing

Palpation is when you examine your horse with your hands and gain precious information about the condition and health of your horse.

When palpating your horse, the aim is not to massage him. An equine massage therapist will always palpate the horse before beginning treatment, precisely to find out where your horse is carrying tension. There's no reason why you shouldn't make this a daily habit yourself.

Feeling your horse by hand will create a memory in your brain that will teach you to recognise even small changes.



Touch is how horses take care of each other

The simple act of touching your horse will release oxytocin, the happiness hormone, in both you and your horse making both of you feel better and strengthening your bond. Touch is a way for you to maintain your social relationship with your horse.

Your horse's sense of touch is very sensitive and your horse will be more sensitive in some parts of his body than in others.

You should always use a gentle but firm touch – too firm and it'll hurt, too gentle and it'll tickle and you won't get the information you need.

Remember: your horse is particularly sensitive around the head, the withers and along the flanks.





FEELING YOUR HORSE BY HAND

When was the last time you felt your horse all over by hand?

If it's been a while, then there's no time like the present!

Before you start, brush down your horse to get rid of dirt and debris. I also recommend washing your hands before and after, just because you're going to get up close and personal and don't want to transmit anything nasty by accident.

Make sure that your horse is happy to stand still for the time that you're going to be working on him. You can give him a haynet, if he's a bit fidgety or just work on his training to stand still until he can stand quietly and relax while you examine him.

Use your soft, relaxed hands to feel your horse all over

Start palpating your horse from the neck. Proceed in the direction his hair grows and palpate...

- between the front legs & along the chest
- the front legs down to the corona
- the stomach
- the withers & back
- the flanks
- the rump
- the hindlegs down to the corona
- around the root of the tail & along the dock

Lastly, feel around your horse's head, gently touching everywhere – including the muzzle, around the ears, corners of the mouth and the lymph nodes.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Use your hands like a scanner and look for...

- changes in temperature (heat or coolness)
- gathered fluids
- broken skin
- a strong reaction from your horse
- shying away from or reacting to your touch
- swelling in the legs and joints
- any kind of irregularity or change

Whatever your observations are, consider if you need to call a professional to come and assess the situation.

Never do the disservice to yourself or your horse and leave yourself alone with your suspicions.

Depending on the type of issue you've detected, the right person to call may be your...

- vet
- farrier
- dental technician
- equine massage therapist
- saddle fitter
- nutritionist
- trainer.



In the end, you may even need to consult two or more of these professionals, if the problem or issue requires it.

The earlier you catch and treat a problem, the more likely it is that it'll be resolved easily. It'll also be more treatable and cost less money to begin fixing it early on than waiting until it gets more complex.

WHEN YOU FIND SOMETHING



As you get to know your horse on a deeper level through touch, you're going to come across things that change in his body.

When you do find something, it's a good idea to write down your observations – in a notebook you keep in his tack box or on your phone.

If a more serious issue does begin to develop, you'll be able to go back over your notes and it may help your vet pinpoint the start or cause of the issue.

This will also allow you to track how changes in feed, exercise or the environment effect your horse's mood, energy and well-being.

If you're training your horse rigorously (such as for competition), palpating regularly will let you detect muscle soreness and tension, which will allow you to provide the right kind of treatment and adjust your horse's training program as needed.

You should also brush up on taking your horse's vital signs, if you haven't already, and make that a regular practice as well.

You can find step-by-step instructions with pictures on how to take your horse's vitals on the blog.

Thank you for reading!

