

DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS

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# PRACTICAL HORSEMAN EXTRA

## JUMP-FREE JUMP SCHOOLING

### 6 Steps to Protect Gut Health

Ursula Green  
and Tonic



AMY K. DRAGOO

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# JUMP-FREE JUMP SCHOOLING



Develop winning course-riding habits over ground poles.

**By Cindy Ford ■ Photos by Amy K. Dragoo**

One of my favorite exercises that we use frequently in the Skidmore College riding program is cantering over ground poles. This is a great way to work on course-riding skills without wearing out your horse's legs. It removes the stress and anxiety about "the jump" and teaches you to focus on what really matters: the ride between the fences and through the corners of the ring. By understanding these fundamentals and consistently executing them properly, you will set yourself up for competition success. This is particularly critical in intercollegiate competitions, where riders have so little time to get to know their mounts before going into the ring.

Ground poles teach both horses and riders how to relax and feel confident on course. Students come to our program from around the country (as well as internationally) with a variety of backgrounds and anxiety levels. Over ground poles, they learn to control the horse's straightness, balance and rhythm while maintaining correct position. With these skills, they can tackle courses with a more relaxed, "no big deal" attitude, even on strange horses. Ground poles also allow horses to chill out and tune in to their riders' aids.

Exercises over ground poles are also an excellent refresher for students returning to school after a summer of not riding as much or riding in programs with a different focus. They help to fix bad habits—for example, slowing down an upper body that closes too dramatically over the fences—and reinforce good ones. Working over ground poles reminds riders to use the ends of the ring and stay in balance on the turns. It also helps them feel what is happening on course and react to their horses instinctively, so they can recover from little mistakes before they turn into disasters.

Later in the season, we use ground poles to refine skills even further and zero in on problems. For example, they teach riders to utilize the opening circle on a course for creating the correct canter and track to that elusive first jump.

Setting up a course of ground poles is much easier and more convenient than building a course of jumps. But *riding* over ground poles is *not* easy. When we jump, we can make a lot of mistakes and our horses usually still save us by going over the fences. But when we make mistakes over ground poles, our horses rarely help us out. They chip, break to

**Riding over ground poles and very small jumps is a great way to polish your skills over fences. Here, Skidmore College senior Ursula Green is demonstrating excellent form on Tonic, or "Timmy," an 11-year-old Hungarian Warmblood. She rode a great track to arrive at this flower box straight and centered. In the air, she's already focusing her eyes on the ground pole ahead of her, ensuring that they'll land and continue to it on the correct track, while also maintaining the left lead. Timmy's workmanlike expression illustrates the confidence and "no big deal" attitude these exercises help to develop.**

trot, trip on the rails and so on. That's the magic of ground poles: They magnify riders' mistakes—so it's easier to identify what needs improvement.

In this article, I'll share some of my favorite ground-pole exercises. Remember as you set them up and canter through them, the goal is to reinforce good habits, not to catch your horse with tricks or surprises. Place all of the poles in locations that allow plenty of space for the approaches—so no tight jumper turns. Make distances between them long enough to avoid difficult striding questions—so no in-and-outs—and to enable your horse to add strides easily, when necessary. For the purpose of these exercises, make flying changes only in the corners, never over the poles.

We do these exercises with only well-broke, educated horses and with riders who are jumping at least 2 feet high. Keep in mind, the purpose is to create a confident rider to the jump. You cannot achieve this on a green or unruly horse. I also recommend practicing them with an instructor or ground person to give feedback on your position and canter quality.

## Position and Track

From the beginning of every exercise, strive for the perfect position. Whenever in doubt, refer to the "bible" on this subject, George Morris' *Hunter Seat Equitation*. Here are a few other tips to keep in mind:

- Adjust your stirrups for riding on the flat so when you take your feet out of the stirrups and hang your legs down, the irons hit just above your anklebones. Then place the stirrups on the balls of your feet.
- Stretch your lower legs down and around your horse's sides. Always think "long legs," enveloping your horse's sides.
- Stay connected to the horse and saddle with your lower legs and thighs at all times, even on hotter horses.
- For these exercises, sit down on your seat bones in the center of the saddle as you would for an equitation flat class, rather than in the half-seat you'd use for jumping. Still, think of your seat support-

ing your leg, not the other way around. Different horses require different amounts of seat, but they all jump much better if you ride more off your leg than your seat.

■ Balance your upper body with the horse's motion, not in front or behind. It should be at the vertical or slightly ahead of it. If your hip angle is too closed, you will feel as if you're falling forward. If your upper body is behind the vertical, you're probably taking your leg off your horse and pumping too much with your seat. Ask yourself, "Do I feel off balance and vulnerable? Or do I feel secure?" Your ground person can help you identify the latter, correct position.

■ Adjust your rein length short enough to bring your elbows in front of your body, but not so short that they are straight and stiff. The most common rein mistake I see is too-long reins, which often turn into rough reins.

■ Wrap your fingers around the reins and try to maintain a connection with your horse's mouth at all times.

From this solid position, you can apply appropriate aids to keep your horse's body straight with his hind legs working underneath his body and on your chosen track, never falling in or out on the turns. Place your inside leg at the girth with the stirrup leather perpendicular to the ground, asking him to be supple in his body and curve it around that leg. Keep your outside leg slightly behind the girth to keep his hind end from drifting out. Always think of riding all four "corners" of your horse (his right and left hind and front quarters) with both reins and legs. Use your eyes correctly, always looking where you intend to go. To work on this, practice riding to specific points around the arena.

## Canter

When your horse's body is in proper balance, he can produce his best canter. Ideally, it should feel as if he has plenty of engine and yet is still polite. He should carry himself and not lean on your hands or try to run away with you. His canter should be smooth, consistent, rhythmical and

easy to adjust. This is the canter that will get you to the jump with options—able to add or leave out a stride without risking a chip or awkward launch over the fence. Most mistakes occur because riders either don't find this canter at the beginning of the round or lose it midway and fail to recover it. A consistent, balanced canter is essential to producing a good round.

One good tool for finding the ideal canter is counting in time with your horse's strides. You can do this out loud during a lesson or to yourself in the show ring. This helps you to create a steady rhythm and pace so you can maintain the correct canter for the course that you are jumping. My students find it easier to keep the numbers low when they count: "One, two, three, four, one, two, ... ." If you have to pause to make adjustments and reorganize, start up the count again as soon as you can.

Learning to recognize the feel of a great canter takes a lot of practice. It is easier to do with some horses than others, and it can feel quite different from horse to horse. Some are more athletic than others. Some have bouncy canters while others are extremely comfortable. Fortunately, a horse does not have to be a great mover to have a great canter. He just has to be able to turn on his motor, balance his body and respond politely to your aids.

Once you find the best canter you can produce with your horse, try to create it every time you pick up the canter, whether you're at home or in the show ring.

Throughout all of the following exercises, focus on your position, track and canter quality at all times. If anything goes not according to plan, fix the problem as soon as possible, then return your attention to these three essential factors.

Prior to working over poles, warm up on the flat just as you would to prepare your horse for jumping. Then walk and trot over a single ground pole several times before moving on to the canter so your horse is absolutely comfortable with the idea. Give him—and yourself—every chance possible to succeed.



## Exercise 1: Single Ground Pole



You can see from Timmy's topline and his hind leg stepping underneath his body that his canter is very balanced. Ursula's lovely angles are keeping her in balance. Her reins are a proper length, enabling her to maintain a good connection. Timmy's perked ears indicate that he's focused. This is impressive because they are going down the long side where many tend to lose quality. For this exercise, Ursula should be a bit deeper.



In preparation for the first ground pole, Ursula has opened her hip angle slightly and sunk a little deeper into her seat and heels. She's doing a good job of bending his body around her inside leg while using her outside aids to keep him balanced without caving in or falling out. Note how well aligned his head and neck are with his body. By looking through the turn, Ursula is also keeping Timmy on the correct track to meet it straight and centered.



In the last few strides before the pole, Ursula's excellent position keeps Timmy in balance and focused on the pole. She is sitting nicely on her seat bones—more connected to the saddle and deeper in her heels than in Photo 1—without exaggerating the motion in her hips. Her supporting outside leg is maintaining the right lead. Everything is organized and on track.



As a result, Timmy canters neatly over the pole. Even in the air, Ursula maintains the connection with her left rein and leg so he stays on the right lead. She has, however, lightened her seat a little too much. I would like to see her seat closer to the saddle so she doesn't accidentally encourage the horse to jump over the pole in the future.

### Exercise 1: One Thing (And Pole) at a Time

My first exercise is very simple: two single poles placed on opposite long sides of the arena, several feet off the rail and about 100 feet from the corners.

Always start with an opening circle, creating that balanced, organized, solid canter with a medium-length stride. (If you

have too much canter, your horse might be tempted to jump the pole.) Canter at least one circle. If the canter still needs improvement, make another circle.

When you like the canter, proceed to the pole, using the end of the ring in your approach and riding your turns very precisely. Use your eyes through the final turn, looking at the center of the pole.

This will help to prevent you from caving in on the circle or falling to the outside. As you canter out of the final turn, you should already be straight and on track to the pole.

Instead of worrying about the striding to it, focus on maintaining your lead, canter quality and straightness. Keep your connection to the saddle and your horse's





**After the first pole, Ursula canters all the way around the ring to the second pole on the opposite long side. She had to stay connected and maintain her good canter the whole way in order to meet this pole in the same nice balance. Achieving this consistency is harder than it sounds! I like her deeper heels and closer connection to the saddle over this pole. Her slightly closed hip angle is also allowing her upper body to stay with the motion, centered over the middle of the horse.**

mouth. Three or four strides away, elevate your eyes to a point beyond the pole and plan where you're going. Remain sitting over the pole, reminding yourself, "This is not a jump. It is a pole on the ground."

If you have a great canter, chances are your horse will meet the pole perfectly and canter neatly over it. If he chips or

breaks to a trot, ask your ground person for input on what looked amiss in your position, track or canter. Did you not support him enough with your legs? Was your upper body ahead of or behind the motion? Is he falling in on the turns? Maybe you need more inside leg and outside rein. Try to identify the problem, then fix

it in another circle before approaching the same pole again. Deal with one thing at a time. Eventually, you will get everything right and your horse will canter over the pole correctly every time.

If he jumps the pole instead, don't make a big move with your body. Soften your elbows and follow his motion as best you can. Then rebalance his canter and repeat the exercise until he realizes, "Oh, it's just a pole," and canters quietly over it.

If he swaps leads over the pole, make a simple change afterward, then circle back to repeat the exercise. This time, check that you're using enough outside aids to keep him straight. To end repeated lead swapping, work more on a circle and less on straight lines. The number-one reason for lead swapping is a horse who is not around your inside leg and whose hindquarters are not adequately supported by your outside leg. Never hesitate to circle after a pole to correct these mistakes.

Each time you canter over the pole, continue to ride straight ahead afterward, re-establishing your good canter and track before turning across the ring and returning to the same pole.

Once this single pole feels good, canter over it again, then make a circle and approach the pole on the other side of the arena. Ride it just the same way, maintaining your position, track and canter. If that goes well, canter the poles one after the other without making a circle in between.

Repeat the entire process in the other direction. Be aware that you may feel like you're on a new horse riding a new canter, which may be either better or worse depending on which lead he favors.

## Exercise 2: A Line Of Poles

Next, build a simple line of two poles about 72 feet apart, again placed far enough from the corners so you have plenty of space to practice maintaining your track and balanced canter in the approach and recovery.

Pick up the same great canter you had

Riding students have benefited from **Cindy Ford's** words of wisdom for more than 40 years. She rode and taught at Peter Van Guysling's Dutch Manor Stables in Guilderland, New York, for many years before becoming the director of riding at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1988. Two years later, she accepted the additional role of team coach. Since then, she has guided the Skidmore Thoroughbreds to six Intercollegiate Horse Show Association national team championship titles, bringing the team's total to eight IHSA national championships.

In addition to her Skidmore College students, Cindy also trains Juniors and Adult Amateurs and coaches them at U.S. Equestrian Federation-recognized shows year-round.

A big proponent of the sport as a whole and of horse shows in her region, Cindy was instrumental in creating the Skidmore College Saratoga Classic, a two-week A-rated horse show held every June since 1998. She is a trustee of the local Capital District Hunter/Jumper Council, which she helped to establish. In 2011, in recognition of her great contributions to the sport over the years, Cindy received the IHSA Lifetime Achievement Award.





## Exercise 2: A Line of Poles



Next, Ursula approaches a line of poles. She's found the same organized medium canter that she had in Exercise 1 and is looking through the turn toward the first pole. Timmy is bending around her inside leg in a nice, balanced frame.



This time, he takes a more athletic step over the pole—not quite a jump, but more elevated than his normal canter stride. Instead of stiffening in the saddle or falling behind the motion, Ursula just lightens her seat and hand a little. She's still in a good position, looking ahead to the next pole, which encourages Timmy to focus on it as well.



In between the poles, Timmy is tempted to lengthen his canter stride, so Ursula is applying a little more rein pressure to remind him to maintain the same, balanced canter. Having the correct length of rein makes this easy for her to do effectively. Meanwhile, her right leg is keeping his hindquarters in line so he holds the left lead while her eyes stay focused ahead to keep Timmy straight on the track.



By the time they reach the second pole, Ursula has restored the organized canter and nice shape in Timmy's topline. She's sitting closer to the saddle now, which encourages him to take a normal canter stride over the pole. The fact that he stayed on the left lead shows that she did a good job maintaining his balance and straightness.

in Exercise 1 and begin counting out loud (or to yourself), still keeping your numbers low: "One, two, three, four, one, two ... ." Over the first pole, stay connected to your horse's sides with your seat and legs and to his mouth with your hands. Continue counting to the next pole to keep your canter consistent. Don't worry how many

strides your horse takes—it may be six or seven. Focus more on maintaining his straightness, quality of canter and rhythm. If he's too strong down the line, go back to working over just one pole.

Just as before, be prepared to react to any mistakes. If your horse breaks to trot in the middle of the line, allow him to trot

over the second pole. Then make a circle at the end of the ring, re-establish your canter, track and position and repeat the exercise. Use this opportunity to re-evaluate the effectiveness of your aids. Did you take your leg away? Did you lighten your seat? Did your reins get too long?

If your horse repeatedly meets the



## Exercise 3: A Course of Poles—Rollback

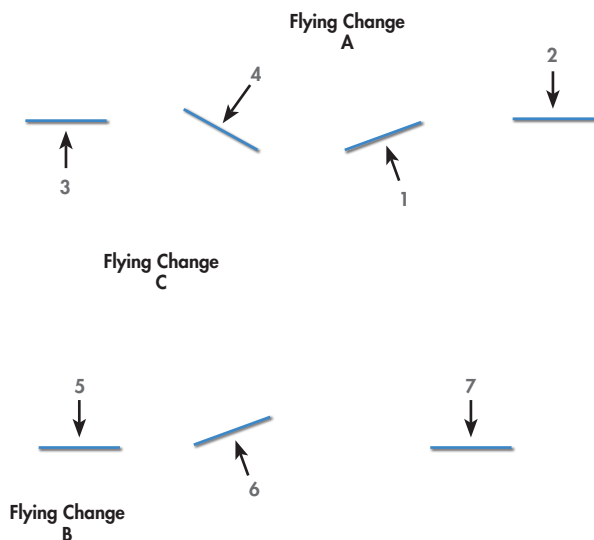


High-school senior Georgia Goodell is riding Warhol, or “Andy,” a 12-year-old Dutch Warmblood. Georgia’s done a good job organizing his canter, which helps her meet the first pole perfectly. The angles in her position are great, her rein length is good and her deep heels and connection to the saddle tell Andy to go over the pole in a normal canter stride. She is already looking ahead.



As she got to the end of the ring, Georgia looked back over her shoulder, focusing on the next pole before she initiated the turn. Here with her eye still focused on the second pole, she uses an opening rein to make the turn. Meanwhile, she supports Andy with both hands and legs, as well as her seat. This keeps him balanced and on the correct track to take them straight to the pole.

## Ground-pole Course



Pick up the left lead and canter a large opening circle. Maintain the left lead over Pole 1. At the end of the arena, execute a flying change at A. Canter over Pole 2, maintaining the right lead across the arena to Pole 3. Canter Pole 4 without allowing your horse to swap to the left lead over the pole or down the broken line to Pole 5. Maintain the right lead over Pole 5 and ask for a flying change at B. Proceed over Pole 6, maintaining the left lead and execute a flying change at C. Roll back to Pole 7 on the right lead. Canter past the in-gate and return to a walk.

second pole awkwardly, the distance isn’t working. Ask your ground person to roll the poles a foot or two closer or farther apart. The purpose of this exercise is not to test him but to build his and your confidence over a comfortable distance.

Once you’re riding this line successfully, play with the striding. Try doing it in one less stride by riding with a little softer arm and, if necessary, a slightly stronger leg. Then try collecting a little to add a stride. This will make your horse more

adjustable and you more confident about controlling the canter stride.

### Exercise 3: A Course Of Poles

Now you’re ready to try these skills on a course of poles. Have fun with your course design. Be sure to incorporate any questions you might encounter in the show ring—bending lines, rollbacks, fences on the diagonal and so on. Look online for courses used at competitions in the past, such as an equitation final. Just replace any in-and-out with a single pole. I’ve also given a sample, basic course on this page.

When you ride these courses, always start with a good circle. Practice holding your lead on the lines—including bending lines—and make any necessary flying changes in the corners. If you’re having trouble meeting the poles smoothly or balancing your horse in between them, try counting throughout the entire course. Anytime you feel things start to unravel, circle and get organized again.

### Exercise 4: Incorporate “Speed Bumps” and Jumps

To begin practicing your new good habits over real fences, set up the same line of



## Exercise 3: A Course of Poles—Rollback



As a result, Andy arrives at the second pole in the same balanced canter. Georgia continues using her outside aids over the pole so he's not tempted to swap leads in the air or make an automatic lead change as they head back toward the rail. Instead, she insists that he maintain the right lead all the way to the rail ...



... where she then asks for a flying change to the left lead, turning her eyes to focus in the new direction. Everything else is still the same—her nice position in the saddle, her connection to the horse and his good balance and straightness.

## Exercise 4: Incorporate “Speed Bumps”



In the approach to a small flower box, Georgia has made a nice, balanced turn. Andy is curving his body perfectly around her inside leg and they are both already focused on the jump. Georgia is somewhat looser in her arms and lighter in her seat, telling Andy that it's OK to jump the fence this time.



Because it's such a small jump, she is careful not to make a big move with her body. Her upper body is slow and calm and her hands are maintaining a connection to his mouth. Both are already focused on the ground pole ahead. After landing, Georgia will sit down in the saddle, reorganize and rebalance to create the same good, controlled canter that they had in Exercise 3.

poles that you used in Exercise 2. This time, build the first pole into a small cross-rail or vertical, about 1 foot high. Then canter to it, still sitting in the saddle, but staying somewhat looser in your arm and following your horse's motion a little more with your upper body.

Think of this jump as just a “speed bump.” Your horse's effort over it shouldn't create enough thrust to push

you up and out of the saddle. Avoid any exaggerations in your rein release or position. Simply reward your horse with a slightly following upper body and arm. After the jump, reorganize and canter to the pole. Then practice riding the line in the other direction.

In your regular jump schooling, throw a ground pole or two into your exercises and courses now and then. Many riders

allow their canter and track to deteriorate after a few jumps. Adding a pole here and there reinforces the necessity of balance and control. When you approach each pole, sit down in the saddle and focus on your position, canter and track. This is a great way to remind you and your horse to pay attention to what really matters—and to take a deep breath and remind yourselves, “We've got this!” 🐾





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# 6 Steps to Protect Gut Health

*Good choices in feed and management are the key.*

**BY ELAINE PASCOE WITH LIARA GONZALEZ, DVM, PHD, DACVS**

**W**hat are your horse's odds of developing colic or gastric ulcers? The answer may depend in large part on you. "Gut issues are always a threat to horses, but you can take steps to reduce the risk," says Liara Gonzalez, DVM, PhD, DACVS, an assistant professor focusing on gastroenterology and equine surgery at North Carolina State University.

To protect your horse from GI threats, she advises, start by copying nature in what, when and how you feed him. In this article Dr. Gonzalez outlines six steps that will put you on the right path.

## **1. FEED FORAGE**

You can meet most of your horse's nutritional needs with high-fiber forage, like hay and grass. "Forage is the most natural food source for horses," Dr. Gonzalez says, "and the act of chewing and eating forage stimulates the gut."

After all, your horse is a grazing animal, built to roam around munching grass all day. His entire GI tract is designed to process small amounts of forage continuously. A steady flow of chewed forage soaks up digestive juices in the stomach and buffers acidity that could cause gastric ulcers. Farther along, in the cecum and hindgut, helpful microbes break down fibrous plant material and extract nutrients.

Steady forage intake helps keep the horse's gut microbes in

Help your horse avoid gastric issues by keeping him in the most natural routine possible, with plenty of turnout, a high-fiber diet and a consistent feeding schedule.





## Digestive Supplements

Search online and you'll find dozens of different digestive supplements for horses. There are products with probiotics (live bacteria and yeasts thought to aid digestion), prebiotics (enzymes and yeast extracts to nourish those microbes), amino acids such as glutamine and threonine, antacids such as bicarbonate, psyllium (to help lubricate the colon and move material through) and more.

Speak with your veterinarian if you think a supplement might help your horse and do research before you buy, says Dr. Liara Gonzalez, DVM, PhD, DACVS. "Ask: Where is the data? Some companies have paid researchers to conduct tests to support their claims. That doesn't mean the results are not valuable but find out what kind of testing was done and if the results were published." Studies can be published in peer-reviewed scientific publications.

Quality is another issue. Products from established makers are generally more likely to be consistent from batch to batch, but there's little oversight of supplements. For the same reason, Dr. Gonzalez cautions against using compounded versions in place of FDA-approved gastric-ulcer medications (GastroGard® and the preventive UlcerGard® are FDA-approved).

How will you know if the supplement you choose helps your horse? "First decide what benefit you're looking for and what will be your metric of success," Dr. Gonzalez says. "Then change one thing and see." Knowing what you want from the supplement and how you will measure improvement will help make your assessment less subjective.



◀ A steady forage intake can help keep equine digestive issues at bay.

balance and his gut functioning as it should. When horses are stalled and fed intermittently, risks of colic and gastric ulcers begin to rise. Here's what to do:

- Maintain pasture. Green pasture is a great source of nutrients for most horses. (For some, too much green grass increases the risk of laminitis, an inflammatory disease that weakens the bond between the hoof wall and the underlying bone. Hay is a better forage choice for them.)
- Feed hay free choice when good pasture isn't available or appropriate. "Offer hay all the time," Dr. Gonzalez says. This mimics the horse's natural foraging habits and helps keep his GI tract running smoothly. Most horses easily consume 2 percent of their body weight in hay daily.
- Test forage quality. Hay should be pliable, sweet-smelling, and free of weeds, mold and dust—but those qualities don't tell you much about its nutrient content, which can vary widely. "Your state Cooperative Extension Service or land-grant university can analyze hay or pasture grass and tell you what it provides nutritionally," Dr. Gonzalez says. (If you buy hay by the bale, ask your suppliers if they test. Your Extension office may also have information on typical nutrients in hay grown in your region.)
- Tailor forage choices to your horse's specific needs. For example, including some alfalfa in forage may help a horse who is prone to gastric ulcers. Research shows that alfalfa hay can lower stomach acidity for as long as five hours after feeding.
- "If your horse is overweight or tends that way, give him 'chewing hay' that's less nutritionally dense but still good quality. He'll have something to put in his stomach without taking in so many calories," Dr. Gonzalez says. Slow-feeder hay nets and bags are another way to give horses constant



▲ Make any changes in the type or amount of your horse's diet gradually.



access to hay without risking unhealthy weight gain.

“Overweight is as bad as underweight when it comes to health, so be aware of body condition and adjust your feeding program accordingly. Use a weight tape to monitor changes in weight,” Dr. Gonzalez suggests. A tape doesn’t give an accurate measure of actual weight, but it will let you see if the horse is gaining or losing. If you’re worried that he’ll be short on vitamins and minerals, give him a single vitamin-mineral supplement balanced to complement his hay.

## *When horses are stalled and fed intermittently, risks of colic and gastric ulcers begin to rise.*

When good hay isn’t available (or if your old horse has trouble chewing it), turn to substitutes. “Bagged, chopped hay is expensive but good,” Dr. Gonzalez says. “Hay cubes are also good, but be sure to soak them in water before feeding.” (Fed dry, the cubes may contribute to choke, in which a wad of feed blocks the esophagus.) Processed complete feeds that are designed to replace hay are another option. These feeds contain mixtures of grain and forage and generally have more calories per pound than hay.

### **2. FEED CONCENTRATES WISELY**

“Show horses, and others with high-energy demands typically need more calories than hay alone provides,”

Dr. Gonzalez says. Grains and processed concentrates are high in carbohydrates and provide lots of energy, but they carry risks. “Large amounts, especially large amounts of grain feeds high in sugars and starch, change gut pH and motility,” she explains. These changes increase the risk of intestinal gas and impaction. Excess carbohydrates are also linked to laminitis.

Follow best practices:

- Pick the right product. Many commercial feeds are formulated to complement different forages and to suit horses at different stages in life. For example, young horses need extra energy, protein and the right balance of minerals for growth; senior horses may develop digestive or metabolic problems that call for changes in diet. Feeds labeled “balanced” provide necessary vitamins and nutrients, so horses getting these feeds generally don’t need vitamin-mineral supplements.
- Feed the least amount necessary to meet your horse’s nutritional needs, based on his activity level and his age. Measure quantity by weight, not volume.
- Divide grain and processed concentrates high in sugar and starch into several small feedings a day, spaced at least five hours apart. One rule of thumb limits the amount at any single feeding to half a percent of the horse’s body weight, and the daily total to one-and-a-half percent.
- Feed fat for extra calories: Fats and oils are rich in calories and don’t carry the risks of colic and laminitis that starches and sugars do. Instead of feeding larger amounts of grain if your horse needs more energy, slip some vegetable oil or a commercial high-fat supplement into his feed.





▲ Keep tabs on your horse's water consumption and make sure he always has access to fresh, clean water.

### 3. FEED CONSISTENTLY

Abrupt changes in your horse's diet—a different concentrate, a new load of hay or sudden access to lush pasture—can trigger loose manure or even colic. Gas production often increases as the microbes in the horse's gut adjust. To avoid problems:

- Make changes in the type or amount of your horse's rations gradually. Mix new hay or feed with old, gradually increasing the proportion of new over five days or so. If you're adding fats or oils, go even slower. Start

*Add a little warm water to buckets during cold spells and use heaters in outdoor troughs.*

with small amounts (like a quarter cup of oil divided among feedings) and make small increases every few days. If your horse isn't used to pasture, start by letting him graze for a half hour or so and gradually increase the time.

- Choose a quality commercial feed—it's likely to be more consistent in content than a mix from a local mill.
- Don't rush exercise. "During exercise, blood leaves the intestines to provide oxygen where it's needed most—heart, brain, large muscles," Dr. Gonzalez says. "Allowing time after feeding before exercise is generally a good idea, but it can depend on what is fed and what the exercise consists of."

### 4. MAKE SURE HE DRINKS

"Horses should always have access to water," Dr. Gonzalez says. Dehydration is a major health risk and can lead to impaction colic, not to mention kidney damage and other severe outcomes. To ensure that your horse drinks his fill:

- Provide fresh, clean water at all times. Dump, scrub and refill water buckets daily and top them off through the day. Keep outdoor water troughs filled and clean them at least every

couple of weeks. If you use automatic waterers, clean them regularly and check often to be sure they're working properly.

- Keep tabs on water consumption. An idle 1,100-pound horse typically drinks 6 to 10 gallons of water a day, but factors like heat and exercise levels can increase that amount by 50 percent or more. Diet is a factor, too—pastured horses get moisture from green grass and may drink less than stalled horses.
- Let him drink after exercise. Old beliefs notwithstanding, there's no evidence that it's harmful. And if the horse has lost fluid through sweat, he needs to replace it ASAP.
- Let him drink on the road. "On long trips, stop and offer water every couple of hours," Dr. Gonzalez advises. "Some horses refuse unfamiliar water, so take portable water containers from home." At shows, offer water at least every hour—don't wait until your classes are done and you're back at the trailer.
- Keep him drinking in winter. Many horses seem to prefer room-temperature water—neither warm nor very cold—and may drink less when their water is frigid. Add a little warm water to buckets during cold spells and use heaters in outdoor troughs.

There are more ways to encourage water consumption at times when your horse may not drink enough: Soak hay to sneak some extra moisture into his diet. Provide salt to stimulate thirst, in a salt block or added to his concentrate before going on the road.

"You can disguise the taste of unfamiliar water by adding apple-flavor electrolytes or by adding a bit of sweet feed to his water, but be sure to provide a bucket of plain water alongside," Dr. Gonzalez says. "Experiment at home





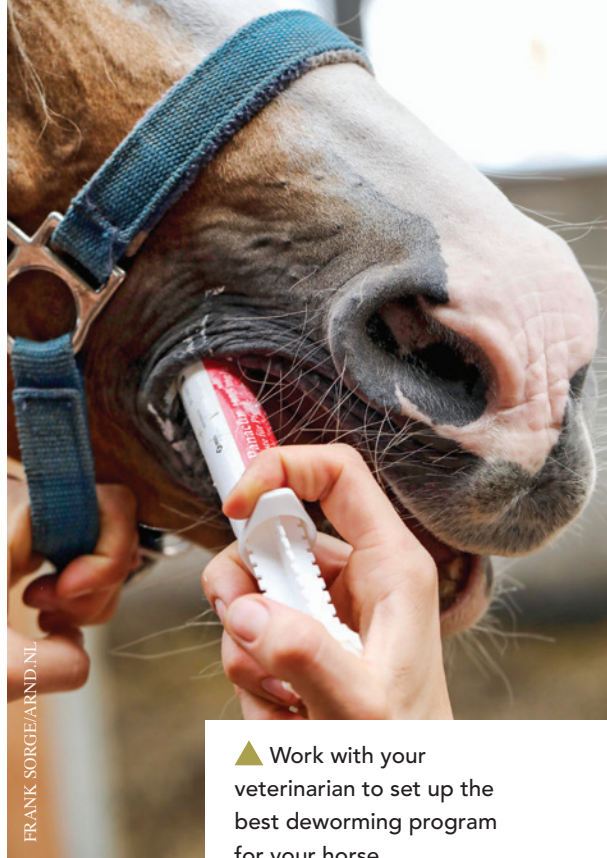
▲ Since horses are herd animals, they benefit from being turned out with other horses.

with these solutions—don't wait until you go to see what he will accept."

## 5. TURN HIM OUT

Stabled horses colic more often than horses who spend most of their time outside, research shows. They're more likely to develop gastric ulcers, too. Moving around at liberty mimics the horse's natural lifestyle and stimulates gut activity. "My horses are not stalled, which is ideal but not possible for everyone. People have to work with what they have," Dr. Gonzalez says. Here's what to do:

- Give your horse as much time out as possible. When turnout is limited, light exercise can also help keep his digestive system in good working order.
- Turn him out with a compatible buddy (or buddies) if you can. Horses are herd animals, and lack of contact with others can be stressful for them.
- Patrol paddocks and pastures for poisonous plants and debris your horse could accidentally ingest. Check for signs of chewing on fences or other objects. Some horses develop enteroliths, rocklike objects that form when mineral layers build up around a foreign object that ends up in the gut. These stones can grow large enough to block the intestine.
- If the soil is sandy, consider supplementing your horse's diet with psyllium (see "Digestive Supplements" on page 98). Sand ingested as the horse grazes can build up in the intestines, leading to colic. If he's turned out in a sand paddock, put his hay in a feeding rack or a hay net, with a stall mat underneath to catch whatever falls to the ground.



▲ Work with your veterinarian to set up the best deworming program for your horse.

## 6. FOLLOW BEST PRACTICES

Good stable management provides more ways to ensure gut health:

- Block parasites. Intestinal parasites, including tapeworms and small strongyles, are linked to problems ranging from diarrhea to impaction colic. Work with your veterinarian to set up a deworming program that makes sense for your horse, with annual or biannual fecal egg counts that check effectiveness. "We've moved away from treating all horses on the same schedule because we don't want parasites developing resistance to the deworming medications," something that has already started to happen, Dr. Gonzalez says.
- Call the dentist. If your horse can't chew his feed properly, he's at greater risk for impaction and choke. Moreover, poorly-chewed food may not be fully digested, so he misses out nutritionally. "Every horse should have an annual or biannual dental exam," Dr. Gonzalez says. "Teeth may not need floating but should be checked at least once a year as a preventive, especially as the horse ages and his teeth show more wear."
- Use meds as directed. Antimicrobial drugs can kill beneficial gut bacteria along with microbes that cause disease. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as phenylbutazone and flunixin meglumine (Banamine®) reduce inflammation, but long-term use of NSAIDs has been linked to colic, ulcers and inflammation in the hindgut. These drugs are invaluable, but they should be used only when prescribed by the veterinarian.
- Be watchful. Know your horse's normal behavior patterns and watch him closely to spot subtle changes that may signal the start of GI trouble. You can't always prevent these problems, but prompt treatment can be the key to a happy outcome. 🐾





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