



PREPARING YOUR HORSE FOR BOX REST

By IH Trainer
Emma Sharman



All photos courtesy of Emma Sharman

Emma has her own business, EJS Vet Physio and Horsemanship, based in Suffolk, doing canine and equine physio. As an IH Trainer, she specialises in confidence building for owner and horse, and groundwork and foundation skills for young horses. Emma is passionate about education and provides Exercise and Obstacle Clinics and partners up with other equine professionals to give weekend clinics that work towards rider and horse confidence and performance development.

• To find out more about Emma and the clinics she organises, visit: www.ejsvetphysio.co.uk

Box rest can be a necessity at times of injury, illness, or post-operation. It may be needed for just a few days or for several months, so spending a little time at the start to think and plan how you and your horse are going to get through this time will help you to make the best of it and can lead to better results in the long term. Thinking about how to manage the stable, what exercise plans to use and understanding the benefits, but also risks, of box rest can be beneficial to both you and your horse.

IMPORTANT!

Remember that every horse and injury is different, so it is important to talk with your vet and vet physio regarding which exercises would be best and when to start them. The following is a general guide.

What are the benefits of box rest?

Having your horse on box rest can be a daunting time, and there will inevitably be a setback in the training and fitness of your horse, but there is always a silver lining. So, let's look at the positives of box rest!

✓ **Healing:** keeping your horse on box rest allows the injury to heal and recuperate and allows the horse time to recover from illnesses and operations.

✓ **Bonding opportunity:** as you have to handle, groom and skip out more, you are going to be with each other

longer than normal, so use this time to get to know your horse, to learn all their good scratching spots, and you'll end up with a stronger bond!

✓ **Handling practice:** when you get to the in-hand walk phase, don't just walk around at the end of the line. Why not try practice leading? Practice with them, stopping when you stop and walking when you walk without touching the line.

You can also use this chance to redo beginner lessons and to learn new methods to strengthen your horse, so they are even more prepared to be ridden again. Think about what you wanted to change in your horse before

Will, owned by Zoey Cooper, was diagnosed with proximal suspensory desmitis in both hind limbs and kissing spine. This led to 6 weeks box rest after surgery for the suspensory ligament.



“...use this time to get to know your horse...”

the box rest and devise a plan to meet that goal. Make sure you investigate some in-hand and long reining exercises. And take your time!!

✔ **Make it fun:** horses will find box rest boring, so have fun making new things for them to play with, investigate and snack from. An example is to put several buckets of water in the stable, each containing something different – i.e. mint, apples, electrolytes etc. See which bucket is emptied first! This can also help to keep them hydrated.

TOP TIPS FOR BOX REST...

- **Gut movement is very important for box rest horses to avoid colic. As the gut is stimulated naturally by movement, we need to give ad lib forage and plenty of fresh water to keep the horse healthy. You can also get advice from a nutritionist.**
- **Stable entertainment ideas: licks, mirrors, hidden treats, radio, have multiple hay nets in different areas of the stable and at different heights.**
- **Regular grooming and remember to hoof pick!**
- **Keep skipping out regularly!**
- **Have a go at massage.**

What are the negative sides of box rest?

When an animal, by nature, is built to constantly move, putting them in a confined space is likely to cause some issues. Here are some things to think about:

✔ **Stress:** this can manifest itself in several ways, such as crib-biting, weaving and box-walking. Try and find what the main point of stress is. Some horses like to be in the centre of a busy yard and watch the world, whereas others would rather be in a quiet and peaceful place. Making sure there is always a horse next door or where they can be seen may help with some horses. Sometimes a mirror in their stable can help, or even having a companion such as a sheep in the stable with them. Having a companion does bring risks of kicking, so do make sure the stable is big enough and the two get along.

✔ **Respiratory issues:** dust can cause respiratory issues, which can come out as nasal discharge and coughing. Make sure there is good ventilation, and you can try dust-free bedding, soaked hay or haylage.

✔ **Weakness:** lack of movement will cause ligaments, tendons, muscles, and even bones to weaken. As the saying goes, 'If you don't use it, you'll lose it'. A vet physio can advise and help you to devise an exercise plan to minimise this and start your rehabilitation journey with your horse.



Photos courtesy of Jenny Byrne

CASE STUDY: BOX REST MANAGEMENT FOR CHECK LIGAMENT INJURY

Here is a set up that Jenny Byrne had when her horse, Jay, was put on box rest for 12 weeks due to a check ligament injury.

In the stable she had a haynet, a bucket of meadow grass, a treat ball and a large dog toy with different vegetables and treats. When Jay travelled back home from staying at university, they had a great set up for him to still be able to rest and interact with other horses too.

5 STABLE EXERCISES TO HELP MAINTAIN YOUR HORSE'S CONDITION

Stable exercises are a great way to help keep some muscle tone in your horse while on box rest. These ones specifically aim for the core and stabilising muscles that will form the groundwork of your horse's rehabilitation.

WEIGHT SHIFT EXERCISES

These weight shifts are level one, so gentle, and a great start to keep your horse's body working on box rest. The aim is to have muscle contraction and relaxation, strengthening your horse's core and stabilising muscles. They also help to keep blood flowing around the body. You can do these exercises 2-3 times a day.

1 Shoulder Rocks

Hand on the withers and start by gently rocking your horse side to side. Keep a rhythm and slowly increase the rock until you see muscle contraction in the forelimb.



These kinds of rhythmic rocks are also a kind of fascia release and horses can find it relaxing as Mistral is demonstrating.

2 Lateral Hindquarter Rocks

Hand on top of the hindquarters and another holding on to the top of the tail bone. Gently rock the hindquarters side to side, and slowly increase the rock until you see muscle contraction while keeping a rhythm in the rock.



Gently rock the hindquarters from side to side

TIP✔ If you horse doesn't like their tail being held you can put both hands on top of the hindquarters

Continued overleaf >>

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<< Continued from previous page

3 Chest weight shifts

Hand on the horse's chest and, starting very gently, push and let the body rebalance. Slowly push harder and keep a rhythm. By starting with a light touch and slowly increasing the pressure, your horse will be less likely to step back.



Make sure you start off light as the horse may think you are asking them to move back

4 Hindquarter weight shifts

Hand either side of the tail, gentle push and let the body rebalance, start off light, and keep a rhythm. Make sure your horse is happy for you to stand behind them, if this is not safe to do, just do the chest weight shifts.



Hands each side of the tail



Make sure your horse is happy for you to stand behind them

TIP ✓

Instead of a carrot you can have other fruit or treats or even a lick

i **REMEMBER!**

These exercises are a great way to help ensure your horse stays supple. It is a good idea to perform them daily, whether or not you horse is on box rest

TIP ✓

Make sure your horse is standing square before starting each stretch

IH Training Section

CARROT STRETCHES

Stretching will help to keep your horse supple and increase blood circulation, just like doing some Pilates or yoga. Try and hold these stretches for 5-10 seconds and repeat them 2-3 times. These carrot stretches are great to do after the weight shifts.

5 Nose between the fetlocks

Using a carrot, encourage your horse's head down and between their fetlocks.



Try and hold each stretch for 5-10 seconds

TIP ✓

If your horse is struggling to hold the stretch don't go as far the next time

6 Lateral stretch

Standing behind the shoulder, use a carrot to encourage your horse to bring their head round to the side – without them taking a sidestep.



Remember to stand behind the shoulder

“It is impossible to move just one part of the horse's body without having effect on posture, movement and balance.”

On a course at 'Horses Inside Out' with founder Gillian Higgins, it was truly amazing to see how such small movements to the body can affect so much. When doing these exercises try and spot the muscle contractions. You will be surprised at how much moves!!

• Thank you to Valley Farm Equestrian Leisure for letting us borrow Mistral as our model for this article, and Jenny Byrne and Zoey Cooper for their pictures and experience with box rest.

i Summary

Box rest can be a nightmare at times and the rehabilitation daunting, but take advantage of your situation and make the best of it. Your vet and vet physio, as well as the other professionals that help you take care of your horse, will be there to help and guide you on your journey and get you and your horse back out there again, doing the things you love to do. 