

The Risks and Benefits of Longeing

By Joseph F. Davis, Jr., DVM

Longeing has long been a method of training the dressage horse that allows him to learn new skills without the distraction of a rider. Conversely, it's also a way to train or exercise an exuberant or physically expressive horse without putting a rider at risk, often with the idea that after a short period of leaping on the longe line, the horse will then be safe to ride. Although there are certain advantages and purposes of longeing, there are a few considerations to keep in mind.

In the instance of longeing a horse to allow him to release excitement before being safely ridden, there is a potential risk to the horse. Leaping on the longe line provides opportunity for injury, either by a misplaced step, falling down or, occasionally, by getting away from the handler. While these things happen, I think they are rare. Another possible side-effect of longeing is that in certain cases, it induces excitement rather than creating a calming effect.

Longeing carries another potential path to lameness if done excessively, as small circles place increased stress on the lower joints in the limb. While it more commonly is a problem in the show-hunter world, I have seen longeing cause synovitis in fetlocks and digital tendon sheaths in young dressage prospects when it was used as the primary source of exercise for a horse.

While the risks of acute injury or chronic degenerative change are real, my experience has been that bad outcomes for dressage horses after longeing are rare. An interesting



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Good judgment and moderation are key to minimizing the risks of longeing.

questionnaire-based epidemiological study published in 2010 seems to support that view. Titled "Identification of Risk Factors for Lameness in Dressage Horses," it found that if the respondent reported his or her horse received "regular longeing exercise," an episode of lameness was 20 percent less likely to occur than if longeing was not a regular part of training. I wouldn't conclude from that study that longeing is a vital part of every dressage horse's exercise, but I would conclude that longeing as typically used in dressage training (i.e., moderately as a supplement to riding, on up to 18-meter circles when used to calm an exuberant horse, smaller circles when the horse is balanced, but never smaller

than 12 meters in diameter over longer periods of time) does not significantly increase the occurrence of lameness.

In the course of my work as an equine veterinarian, longeing is a tool we use to observe a horse moving freely on a circle in a semi-controlled environment without the weight of a rider. It allows us to evaluate back movement, flight of the limbs, etc., and in a majority of the cases that involve forelimb lameness, it accentuates the lameness, which is helpful diagnostically.

I have also found some use for longeing as a therapeutic tool. Longeing with a special system, such as a chambon or degogue, can be a physical-therapy adjunct to medical therapy for horses with back pain. After medical treatment and without the weight of a rider, the horse can be helped by longeing to attain better back mobility and function. However, I advise clients to use longeing systems only if you are an experienced rider or have supervision from an experienced trainer, as you can also cause damage to the horse if used incorrectly.

As in all things with horses, judgment is key and moderation is usually best. By minimizing exuberant behavior (by using a calm voice, trying to keep the horse at a walk for a while or increasing the amount of turnout) and keeping the duration of any one session relatively short, longeing can be a great tool. 🐾

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