



**EQUESTRIAN
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**RETURN TO COMPETITION GUIDELINES FOR THE
SPORT HORSE FOLLOWING A BREAK IN TRAINING
DUE TO COVID-19**

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Foreword

Equestrian Canada (EC) created the Return to Competition Guidelines for the Sport Horse Following a Break in Training Due to COVID-19 to support your horse's safe and progressive return to competition and ensure their health and welfare upon the lifting of competition suspensions related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The document was completed in consultation with the following experts:

- Dr. Alan Manning MSc, DVM – FEI Official Veterinarian for Dressage, Eventing and Jumping; Canadian Dressage Team Veterinarian for the Guadalajara 2011 Pan American Games; Canadian Para-Dressage Team Veterinarian for the Tryon 2018 World Equestrian Games; private practice veterinarian;
- Dr. Hilary Clayton BVMS, PhD, DACVSMR, FRCVS – Professor and McPhail Dressage Chair Emerita, Michigan State University;
- Dr. Jan Henriksen DVM – FEI Permitted Treating Veterinarian; Canadian Eventing Team Veterinarian for the Lima 2019 Pan American Games; private practice veterinarian;
- Dr. Yves Rossier DVM, IPSAV, Dipl. ACVIM – FEI Official Veterinarian for Dressage, Driving, Eventing, Jumping and Reining; National Head FEI Veterinarian for Canada; Member of the FEI Veterinary Committee; EC Equine Medication Control Committee Chair; Professor, Université de Montréal;
- Dayton Gorsline – EC Jumping Youth Development Program Advisor, former member of the Canadian Equestrian Team;
- James Hood – EC High Performance Director;
- Kristy House – EC Manager, Welfare and Industry; and,
- Rachel Huebert – EC Manager, Technical Development.

Special thanks go to the many members of each discipline community who provided support in the development of their discipline-specific guidelines.

Please note: The information in this document are **guidelines**, not rules or mandates, and are intended as a resource for those who choose to use them.

Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stay tuned for additional educational material that will become available by the end of May 2020 to support your return to competition planning. EC has partnered with Dr. Clayton for the creation of three online modules:

- *Conditioning Sport Horses: Principles*
- *Conditioning Sport Horses: Cardiovascular*
- *Conditioning Sport Horses: Strength*



Remember to follow the health guidelines provided by your local, regional, provincial/territorial and federal governments as you resume activity, as these agencies or their designees are responsible for determining when and how each area of the country reopens.

1. Key Considerations

The progression of a conditioning program should be such that fitness and strength improve in parallel with the development of technical skills. Once a horse has learned a technical skill, they tend to retain it but may need work on refinement, whereas fitness must be maintained by regular exercise.

A horse that is out of training for longer than one month loses cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength and resilience in the bones, muscles, ligaments and tendons. After several months, strength regresses to pretraining levels. These deficiencies need to be addressed before returning to full training and competition at their previous levels.

Even though a horse is capable of performing the skills required by a sport, the return to full training and competition should be delayed until adequate fitness and strength have been restored by a targeted reconditioning program.

1.1 COVID-19 EFFECTS ON EQUESTRIAN SPORT

Athletes have had different levels of access to their horses due to varying COVID-19 restrictions across the country, resulting in a spectrum of reconditioning scenarios. These scenarios range from horses that have had no exercise at all to those that have remained in full training programs throughout the pandemic. For horses that have had limited or no exercise, it takes time for them to return to full fitness.

Determining the time required to recondition a horse to their previous fitness level depends on:

- Previous fitness level;
- Duration of the layoff; and,
- Type and amount of exercise during the full or partial layoff (partial training preserves some level of fitness).

1.2 BEFORE COMMENCING RECONDITIONING

Regardless of how long horses have been out of their full training program, athletes should attend to the following before commencing reconditioning:

- If farrier services have been interrupted, it may take more than one trimming/shoeing cycle to restore normality;
- **Check saddle fit.** Lack of conditioning is associated with muscle loss and changes in the shape of the horse's topline. In some cases, a corrective pad may allow for muscular redevelopment. As the back shape changes during conditioning, some horses may need temporary shims or periodic saddle re-flocking. It is best to seek the advice of someone with proper saddle fitting experience; and,



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- Adjust the amount/type of food in accordance with training level and nutritional needs and based off of behaviour indicators.

Core muscle training from the ground can start immediately for all horses. This includes baited stretches (e.g. using a carrot as enticement), stimulated movements to raise the withers, lift the belly and tuck the pelvis, and balancing exercises to activate and strengthen the muscles that transmit forces from the limbs to the trunk. These exercises protect against injury and should be part of routine care for all horses. It is important to ensure you understand the core safety principles of stretching for both the handler and horse.

1.3 DETERMINING HORSE FITNESS LEVEL

Before establishing a reconditioning plan, it is important to establish the horse's current fitness level. The horse's fitness level can be described according to four levels of fitness:

Zero Fitness: Horses that have either never been fit or have lost fitness due to a complete layoff for 12 weeks (three (3) months) or longer, depending on their fitness level when the layoff began. Horses with zero fitness have limited capacity for exercise under saddle and should be brought back to their previous level of fitness slowly.

Baseline Fitness: A horse with baseline fitness is able to:

- Exercise 4-6 days per week;
- Exercise for 30 minutes per workout; and,
- Trot and canter continuously for periods of two (2) minutes.

Baseline fitness is the **minimum** level of fitness required to compete in many equestrian disciplines.

Moderate Fitness: A horse with moderate fitness is able to:

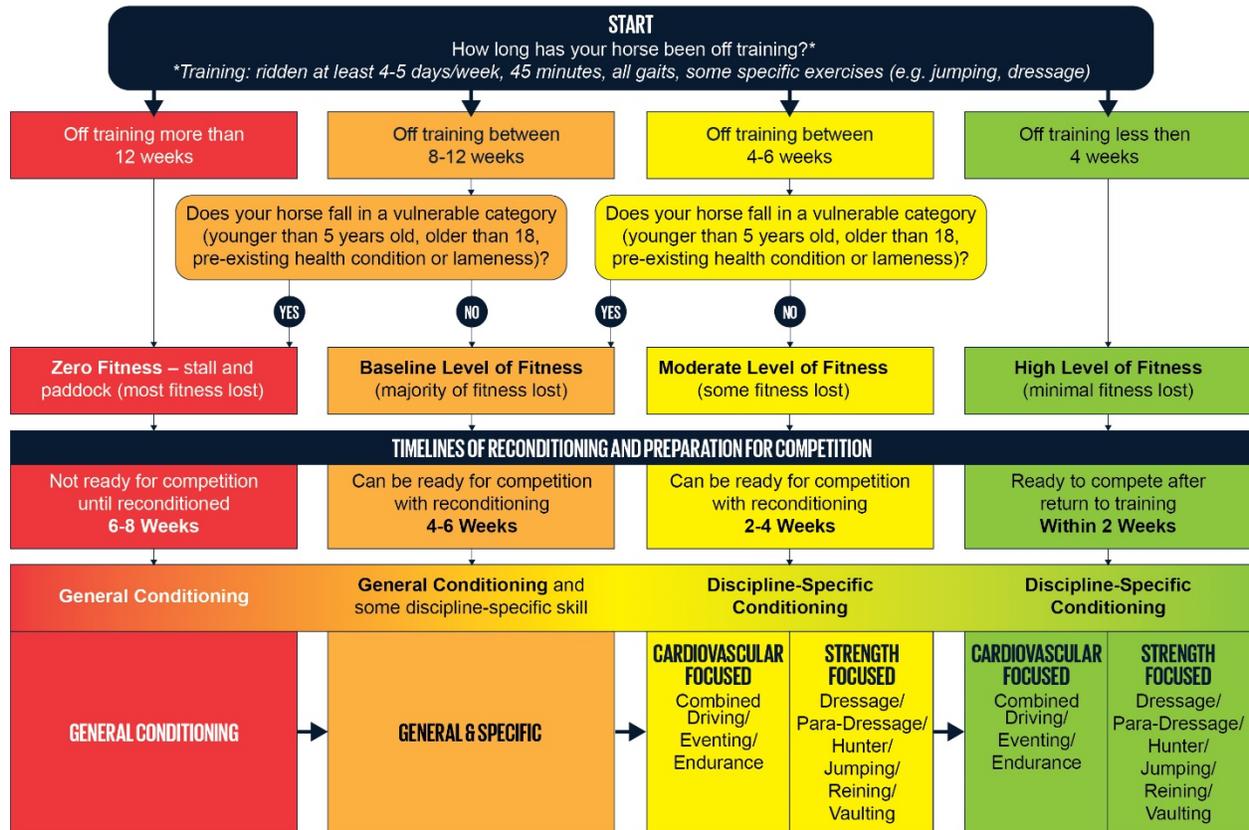
- Exercise 5-6 days per week;
- Exercise for 45-60 minutes per workout;
- Perform multiple bouts of trot and canter for periods of two (2) minutes each; and,
- Perform several consecutive repetitions of strength training exercises appropriate to the discipline.

High Fitness: A horse with high fitness fulfills all the requirements for a moderate fitness level plus the discipline-specific requirements for cardiovascular fitness and/or muscular strength required to compete at an advanced level. These requirements can vary greatly between disciplines.

The horse's fitness, according to the definitions above, will help direct the stage at which the horse resumes training and conditioning exercises. These definitions can also support the athlete in tracking the horse's progress through the reconditioning process.

The below infographic is a guide to help you determine your horse's current fitness level and identify the appropriate reconditioning plan.

HORSE FITNESS LEVEL DECISION TREE



Click on the below links to jump to a specific section:

[General Conditioning](#)

[Dressage](#)

[Para-Dressage](#)

[Combined Driving](#)

[Endurance](#)

[Eventing](#)

[Jumping \(Including Hunter/Jumper\)](#)

[Reining](#)

[Vaulting](#)



1.4 GENERAL CONDITIONING

The following general conditioning information offers guidance for establishing a baseline fitness level for horses competing in any discipline. Beyond a baseline fitness level, the exercises become more discipline specific, taking into account the cardiovascular and muscular strength requirements of each discipline.

Assuming horses that are now at a zero fitness level were fit for competition prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, the reconditioning program should start slowly to allow all parts of the body to improve fitness and strength; this includes the back beneath the saddle, the hooves and all musculoskeletal tissues. Gradual progression is important to avoid discomfort, injury and any subsequent behaviour issues. **Be conservative for the first couple of weeks.**

Here is an example of a gradual general conditioning progression:

Week 1:

- 15 minutes of walking per day including transitions to halt, rein back and leg yield.

Week 2:

- 30 minutes of walking per day;
- Up to two (2) minutes trotting divided into periods of about 20 seconds; and,
- Large (20 metre) circles and easy lateral exercises.

Week 3:

- 30 minutes walking per day;
- Up to four (4) minutes trotting;
- Two (2) minutes cantering divided into periods of about 20 seconds;
- Decrease circle diameter to 15 metres as the horse develops the strength and coordination needed to bend correctly; and,
- Increase the number of transitions.

Week 4:

- 30 minutes walking per day;
- Up to a total of 10 minutes trotting;
- Cantering split into shorter segments;
- Increase the number of transitions between consecutive gaits (e.g. halt-walk, walk-trot, trot-canter) and changes of speed within the gaits to develop strength and balance; and,
- Decrease circle size and use spiral exercises according to the horse's ability.

Thereafter:

In subsequent weeks, the amount of trotting and cantering can be increased incrementally with more frequent transitions. Depending on the discipline and facilities available, poles, gymnastics, jumping, hill work and longer sets of trot or canter may be introduced.

Depending on the facilities available and the horse's rideability, conditioning exercises can be done in the arena or on trails.

Cardiovascular fitness develops quickly; as horses start feeling good, they become more eager to train. Athletes may be tempted to do more but should remain cognizant of the fact that the development of



strength and resilience lags that of cardiovascular fitness. **It is the athlete's responsibility to regulate the workload.**

1.5 CONDITIONING SETBACKS

When conditioning resumes, observe the horse carefully for the development of problems or a recurrence of old injuries. Pay special attention to the following:

Training: Many injuries in sport horses are repetitive strain injuries. There is a very real risk of this type of injury if unfit horses are drilled in an arena day after day in an effort to hasten the return to competition. Trainers and athletes are strongly urged to use the principles of cross-training and allow easy days between hard training days to minimize the risk of injury.

Behaviour: Changes in behaviour should be considered in relation to the horse's diet and the amount and type of exercise being done. During the reconditioning period, it may be difficult to determine whether changes in behaviour are related to the horse feeling fresh and eager/excited to train again, or indicate something that requires further attention, such as nervous tension, anxiety from a previous negative experience or pain. A veterinary evaluation is recommended if bad behaviour persists beyond a few days so that the reconditioning program can be adjusted or therapy initiated.

Pre-existing Conditions: The reconditioning program must take account of any pre-existing conditions (e.g. chronic respiratory disease, metabolic or digestive problems, back and pelvic weakness or pain, lameness) and be modified accordingly. This may include a slower progression in exercise intensity, a modified diet or more emphasis on certain forms of exercises and conditioning. Veterinary and coaching advice will be important in planning any necessary modifications to the reconditioning program.

Lameness: Lameness can develop at any time during training. In some horses, it will be quite obvious, while in others it may initially be very mild or only evidenced by a subtle change like a decrease in gait quality (e.g. loss of suspension, reluctance to go forward) or reactive or hesitant behaviour. If training continues, the lameness may progress and the injury become more serious. It is therefore important to be observant of changes and seek veterinary advice early if the horse shows even a small change in attitude, behaviour or movement.

1.6 ADDITIONAL STRESSORS

Several additional factors contribute to stress and fatigue at competitions. When competition resumes, athletes, coaches, trainers and barn managers should do what they can to reduce stress due to the following (especially in young horses):

- Travel;
- Stabling at showgrounds (e.g. lights, noise, neighbours, disrupted routine, lack of turnout);
- Increased number of workouts (i.e. training sessions, classes) per day;
- Weather (e.g. heat, humidity);
- Different or suboptimal footing; and,
- Withholding medications due to medication rules.

2. Discipline-Specific Conditioning

This section offers practical examples and considerations relative to each individual discipline. Disciplines have been categorized into two general areas: those that are more heavily reliant on cardiovascular fitness and those that rely predominantly on strength.

Discipline Breakdown:

Cardiovascular

Combined Driving
Endurance
Eventing

Strength

Dressage/Para-Dressage
Hunter
Jumping
Reining
Vaulting

Please note that this information was created by discipline-specific veterinary representatives alongside discipline-specific coaches, trainers and athletes, and is meant to be interpreted from their point of view.

2.1 DRESSAGE

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Hilary Clayton as reconditioning guidelines for horses in dressage.

Please note: The information in this document are **guidelines**, not rules or mandates, and are intended as a resource for those who choose to use them.

Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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The current national and FEI level dressage tests cover a distance just over one (1) kilometre and take 5-8 minutes to perform at an average speed of 9-11 kilometres per hour. This is not a strenuous workload, so dressage horses generally do not need to develop a high level of cardiovascular fitness. As the horse progresses through the levels of competition, however, the need for muscular strength increases. This strength is required specifically in the muscle groups that support the development of collection and uphill balance. The requirements for para-dressage horses are equivalent to those for dressage horses competing at national levels but need to be considered in the context of the rider's classification grade; see [Section 2.2 Para-Dressage](#) for further detail.



Much of the conditioning can be integrated into training sessions with the help of an experienced trainer to ensure correct performance of the movements and to offer guidance as to when to progress to new exercises. The timetable suggested below is for guidance only and should be adapted to the individual horse's strengths and weaknesses.

It must be stressed that dressage horses should not be drilled in an arena every day. The reconditioning exercises described below can be performed in an arena, in a field or out on the trail. Performing the exercises in different locations not only helps to avoid injury, it also reinforces the learning process. Cross-training is encouraged since it has a beneficial effect in sparing horses from repetitive strain injuries, such as pulled suspensories. The type of cross-training depends on the facilities/equipment available and the type of activity enjoyed by the individual horse and rider. Examples are trail riding, hill work, poles, gymnastics, jumping, underwater treadmill and swimming.

8-12 Weeks Out of Training:

Dressage horses that have been out of training for 8-12 weeks are likely to have retained a baseline level of fitness and can be ready to compete in 4-6 weeks.

During the first week, the workouts will be short in duration, around 15 minutes, consisting mostly of walking with posting trot being introduced later in the week. In the second week, the duration of the workouts increases to about 30 minutes, still mostly at walk but with gradually increasing amounts of trot, short periods at canter, and some suppling and strengthening exercises at walk, such as turn on forehand, turn on haunches, leg yield and lateral work.

Large diameter turns and circles develop lateral suppleness while improving strength and coordination in the back and abdominal muscles. Over time, the circle size decreases to a 10-12 metre diameter at all gaits. The exercise of spiraling in and out of the circle is particularly useful at trot and canter. Transitions within and between the gaits are strength-building exercises but it is important that they be performed correctly without falling onto the forehand. Starting in the third week, the work should include lengthening and shortening of the stride both on straight lines and on circles. This progresses to medium and collected exercises. Frequent transitions within and between gaits build strength. Start with transitions between consecutive gaits (halt-walk, walk-trot, trot-canter) and progress to transitions across non-consecutive gaits.

Lateral work in trot and canter can be introduced in the third week with gradual increases in the angle and bending. Other dressage-specific movements can be introduced in subsequent weeks as the horse becomes competent in the basic movements.

4-8 Weeks Out of Training:

Dressage horses that have been out of training for 4-8 weeks will have lost some strength and fitness but should return to their previous level in 2-4 weeks. The progression is the same as detailed above with a gradual introduction of conditioning in the first week. After the first week, sufficient fitness has been maintained to allow the horse to progress more rapidly through the conditioning sequence and be fit to compete in 2-4 weeks, depending on the technical quality of the training.

Less Than 4 Weeks Out of Training:

For horses that have been out of training for less than four (4) weeks, the first few days should allow an easy introduction to ridden exercise followed by a rapid return to their previous level of fitness within two (2) weeks.



2.2 PARA-DRESSAGE

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Hilary Clayton as reconditioning guidelines for horses in para-dressage.

Please note: The information in this document are **guidelines**, not rules or mandates, and are intended as a resource for those who choose to use them.

Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remember to follow the health guidelines provided by your local, regional, provincial/territorial and federal governments as you resume activity, as these agencies or their designees are responsible for determining when and how each area of the country reopens.

The national level para-dressage tests take 5-6 minutes to perform. The gaits and movements performed depend on the classification grade, with riders being classified from Grade I (most severely affected) to Grade V (least impaired) based on the athlete's mobility, strength and coordination.

The fitness requirements of a para-dressage horse vary according to the classification grade of the rider. Horses should be conditioned according to the requirements for the grade and the temperament of the horse.

Grade I and Grade II do not present a strenuous workload, so horses competing in these grades generally do not need to develop a high level of cardiovascular fitness. As the horse progresses through the levels of competition, however, the need for muscular strength increases. This strength is required specifically in the muscle groups that support the development of collection and uphill balance. The requirements for para-dressage horses are equivalent to those for dressage horses competing at national levels but need to be considered in the context of the rider's classification grade. For example, a horse ridden by a Grade V rider should focus on developing the quality of walk.

Much of the conditioning can be integrated into training sessions with the help of an experienced trainer to ensure correct performance of the movements and to offer guidance as to when to progress to new exercises. The timetable suggested below is for guidance only and should be adapted to the individual horse's strengths and weaknesses.

It must be stressed that para-dressage horses should not be drilled in an arena every day. The reconditioning exercises described below can be performed in an arena, in a field or out on the trail. Performing the exercises in different locations not only helps to avoid injury, it also reinforces the learning process. Cross-training is encouraged since it has a beneficial effect in sparing horses from repetitive strain injuries, such as pulled suspensories. The type of cross-training depends on the facilities/equipment available and the type of activity enjoyed by the individual horse and rider. Examples are trail riding, hill work, poles, gymnastics, jumping, underwater treadmill and swimming.

8-12 Weeks Out of Training:

Para-dressage horses that have been out of training for 8-12 weeks are likely to have retained a baseline level of fitness and can be ready to compete in 4-6 weeks.

During the first week, the workouts will be short in duration, around 15 minutes, consisting mostly of walking with posting trot being introduced later in the week. In the second week, the duration of the workouts increases to about 30 minutes, still mostly at walk but with gradually increasing amounts of trot, short periods at canter, and some suppling and strengthening exercises at walk, such as turn on forehand, turn on haunches, leg yield and lateral work.

Large diameter turns and circles develop lateral suppleness while improving strength and coordination in the back and abdominal muscles. Over time, the circle size decreases to a 10-12 metre diameter at all gaits. The exercise of spiraling in and out of the circle is particularly useful at trot and canter. Transitions within and between the gaits are strength-building exercises but it is important that they be performed correctly without falling onto the forehand. Starting in the third week, the work should include lengthening and shortening of the stride both on straight lines and on circles. This progresses to medium and collected work. Frequent transitions within and between gaits build strength. Start with transitions between consecutive gaits (halt-walk, walk-trot, trot-canter) and progress to transitions across non-consecutive gaits.

Lateral work in trot and canter can be introduced in the third week with gradual increases in the angle and bending. Other para-dressage-specific movements can be introduced in subsequent weeks as the horse becomes competent in the basic movements.

4-8 Weeks Out of Training:

Para-dressage horses that have been out of training for 4-8 weeks will have lost some strength and fitness but should return to their previous level in 2-4 weeks. The progression is the same as detailed above with a gradual introduction of conditioning in the first week. After the first week, sufficient fitness has been maintained to allow the horse to progress more rapidly through the conditioning sequence and be fit to compete in 2-4 weeks depending on the technical quality of the training.

Less Than 4 Weeks Out of Training:

For horses that have been out of training for less than four (4) weeks, the first few days should allow an easy introduction to ridden exercise followed by a rapid return to their previous level of fitness within two (2) weeks.

2.3 COMBINED DRIVING

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Yves Rossier as reconditioning guidelines for horses in combined driving.

Please note: The information in this document are **guidelines**, not rules or mandates, and are intended as a resource for those who choose to use them.

Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both



general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Combined driving competition requires a combination of obedience, endurance, speed and technical skills on the part of participating horse. These qualities will be tested by the dressage, marathon and cone phases. The reconditioning schedule of the combined driving horse will need to reflect all these aspects, although the fundamental conditioning will centre on endurance and cardiovascular fitness.

Starting after a break of more than 12 weeks, the general reconditioning steps can be based on the following phases:

Phase 1:

- **Long, slow distance**, mostly walking and trotting exercises, on the lunge, long lining or ridden for 1-2 weeks, up to 30 minutes per day.

Phase 2:

- **General exercise** and cardiovascular preparation for 3-4 weeks:
 - At first starting with 3-4 kilometres of walking/trotting exercises with a gradual increase in speed and distance;
 - Alternating between ridden (if possible) or in-harness exercise; and,
 - Alternating between obedience (dressage) and endurance training depending on the needs of each horse.

Phase 3:

- **Gradual return** to combined driving-specific exercises for 3-4 weeks:
 - Increase in distance covered during endurance training sessions (equivalent to the distance and speed of the marathon phase, up to 15 kilometres for advanced level horses);
 - Obstacle training sessions within the endurance training;
 - Interval training sessions to develop speed and recovery ability; and,
 - Cones training sessions to develop skills required for the third phase of competition (cones).

Further Considerations:

- A combined driving horse **must be trained/conditioned in-harness**. Many combined driving horses benefit from being ridden, particularly to school dressage movements, but a combined driving horse cannot be trained by ridden exercise only. They must do most of their endurance training in-harness in light of the efforts and mechanics of pulling the vehicle.
- The use of heart rate (HR) monitors could be very beneficial during the endurance and speed training (intervals) sessions with the following objectives:
 - General conditioning: HR between 80-130 beats per minute;
 - Endurance-oriented conditioning: HR between 130-160 beats per minute; and,
 - Speed and hill conditioning: HR between 150-200 beats per minute.

-
- Speed and endurance conditioning must be adapted to climate conditions. If a horse overheats (temperature over 40° C or 104° F), it will start to pant (rapid, shallow breathing) during recovery. This is a sign that the exercise was too intense in view of the climate.
 - Normal respiratory rate recovery should occur within 10 minutes of when exercise has ended.

2.4 ENDURANCE

The following recommendations were prepared by EC certified Endurance Technical Delegate, Terre O'Brennan, as reconditioning guidelines for horses in endurance.

Please note: The information in this document are **guidelines**, not rules or mandates, and are intended as a resource for those who choose to use them.

Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remember to follow the health guidelines provided by your local, regional, provincial/territorial and federal governments as you resume activity, as these agencies or their designees are responsible for determining when and how each area of the country reopens.

Endurance is one of the most physically demanding disciplines in the equestrian community. Knowing that, riders, trainers and veterinary control judges need to be mindful of the possible adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our equine partners. This includes both their physical health with regards to parameters such as conditioning and basic care (e.g. vaccinations, dental work, physiotherapy/chiropractic that may have been missed due to COVID-19 restrictions), as well as their emotional or mental health (due to decreased turnout, separation from herd mates, change of stabling, etc.). All of these factors will affect the level at which the horse should return to competition.

Questions that we need to ask:

- How much time has my horse had off from training?
- Did my horse have any soundness or health issues going into this rest period?
- What was my horse's level of fitness when COVID-19 started?
- Has my horse lost weight or muscle during the outbreak?
- Is my horse shod, up to date on vaccinations and in overall good health?

Never underestimate the advantages of walking to increase fitness, especially if you have hilly terrain in your community. Walking may not be the most exciting part of riding; however, it can be great for your partner's fitness.

Zero Fitness (missed 12+ weeks or 8-12 with additional health or age risks):

Here is a basic premise for a return to competition program. Based on your individual horse, you can step into this program at the appropriate level.



If your partner has done nothing or close to nothing since the start of COVID-19, then you need to prepare for a more diligent and planned reconditioning program.

A sample reconditioning plan at this level would be:

- Start with walking 10-20 minutes daily and increase by five (5) minutes every few (3-4) days until you are walking over 30-45 minutes under tack;
- Then, start some trotting 3-5 minutes a day and increase by five (5) minutes every 4-7 days depending on previous level of fitness;
- However, break trotting up into 20-30 second intervals;
- Once you are trotting for a total of 15-20 minutes, you can start cantering for a few minutes each day in a similar time frame and interval as the trot conditioning; and,
- **Monitor your recoveries.** Your horse's pulse should always recover to 60 beats per minute or less within 15 minutes of ending exercise. If you are not seeing this level of recovery, you need to decrease the intensity or investigate the possibility of pain or a developing health issue.

Baseline Fitness (missed 4-8 weeks):

If your horse is at this level of fitness, they should:

- Be exercising 25-40 kilometres per week, broken up over multiple days;
- Be ready to start increasing that exercise in either duration or speed; and,
- Be ready to incorporate hill work.

Carefully monitor body weight and soundness, as well as recoveries.

Moderate Fitness (missed 4-8 weeks):

If your horse is at this level of fitness, they should:

- Be able to train 25-40 kilometres per week at moderate speed (9-12 kilometres per hour);
- Recover quickly after short, steep or long, slow climbs and descents;
- Recover well at the end of the workout, including cooling with normal sweating and drying; and,
- Show no visible stiffness, swelling or discomfort in the hours following the workout, including the next day.

High Fitness (missed less than 4 weeks):

Horses in this category are:

- Exercising 40 kilometres per week or more;
- Handling increased speed and elevation changes well; and,
- Recovering well and maintaining body weight, appetite and attitude.

To be ready to return to competition, be sure that your partners are handling this amount and intensity of exercise and recovering well. If you are closer to the four (4) week mark of missed training, be sure to take a few weeks to assess your horse's fitness level by starting out with an easier schedule and increasing intensity every 2-3 days. On average, it takes approximate four (4) weeks for a horse to start to lose their fitness.



Maintenance and Therapies:

It may have been impossible during the COVID-19 restrictions to provide our partners much of the care to which they are accustomed. Dental work, for example, may have been missed, along with non-essential but valuable therapies such as chiropractic and massage. If it remains problematic to provide these, be aware that the horse may be experiencing some level of discomfort and decreased ability to perform. If your farrier schedule was disrupted, be aware that it may take several sessions to return the foot to perfect balance.

Attitude and Stress:

Competition involves mental and emotional stress, as well as physical fitness, and additional consideration should be given to these aspects of our partner's condition. They may well have suffered from isolation and uncertainty much in the same way we have.

- Trailering. It may have been some time since the horse was transported. Is the trailer well maintained? Is the horse as comfortable loading as previously? Prior to a long trip for a competition, taking a shorter trip to an enjoyable training session may be valuable.
- Prior to isolation and social distancing, many of us routinely rode with friends or family. If you have transitioned to riding alone during training, be aware this may be more stressful to your horse.
- If you have had to change stables or separate your horse from herd mates, this can also be a huge stressor that should be considered. Monitor body weight, appetite and attitude carefully. Watch for indicators of gastric ulcers.

2.5 EVENTING

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Jan Henriksen as reconditioning guidelines and sample training plans for horses in eventing.

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Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Eventing is one of the most physically taxing disciplines in equestrian sport. Knowing that, we need our riders, trainers and coaches to be vigilant during these unprecedented times. Eventing has had many bumps in the road the last few years and, given that many horses have missed time training because of COVID-19, we need to be smart about reconditioning to keep our sport and participants safe.



Questions that we need to ask:

- How much time has my horse had off from training?
- Did my horse have any soundness or health issues going into this rest period?
- What was my horse's level of fitness when COVID-19 started?
- Has my horse lost weight or muscle during the pandemic?
- Is my horse shod, up to date on vaccinations and in overall good health?

Never underestimate the advantages of walking to increase fitness, especially if you have hilly terrain in your community. Walking may not be the most exciting part of riding; however, it can be great for your partner's fitness.

Zero Fitness (missed 12+ weeks or 8-12 with additional health or age risks):

The basic premise for a reconditioning program will be covered in this section. You can step into this program at a level that is consistent with your horse's current level of fitness.

If your partner has done nothing or close to nothing since the start of COVID-19, then you need to prepare for a more diligent and planned reconditioning program.

A sample reconditioning plan at this level would be:

- Start with walking 10-20 minutes daily and increase by five (5) minutes every few (3-4) days until you are walking over 30-45 minutes under tack;
- Then, start trotting 3-5 minutes a day and increase by five (5) minutes every 4-7 days depending on the previous level of fitness;
 - Break this trotting up into 20-30 second intervals;
- Once you have been trotting 15-20 minutes, you can start cantering for a few minutes each day in a similar time frame and interval as the trot conditioning;
- Begin to add in lateral work, ground poles and gymnastic exercises; and,
- After a few weeks of pole and gymnastic exercises, gradually start jumping, increasing height at safe and appropriate increments.

Once canter conditioning has started, it is time to start doing more lateral movements, ground poles and gymnastics. After a few weeks of gymnastics, gradually start jumping, increasing the heights at a safe increment.

Baseline Fitness (missed 8-12 weeks):

If your horse is at this level of fitness, they should;

- Exercise a minimum of 30 minutes daily for 4-6 days per week; and,
- Be ready to start increasing the intensity of that schedule.

Moderate Fitness (missed 4-8 weeks):

If your horse is at this level of fitness, they should;

- Exercise a minimum of 30-45 minutes daily for 5-6 days per week;
- Handle several trot and canter sets for periods of 2-3 minutes;
- Train at just below competition level readiness with impulsion, cadence and balance; and
- Before returning to competition, be sure that your partners are handling this workload



and recovering well.

High Fitness (missed less than 4 weeks):

Horses in this category are:

- Exercising 5-6 days per week for a duration of 45-60 minutes;
- Handling several trot and canter sets for periods of 2-3 minutes; and,
- Training at competition level readiness with impulsion, cadence and balance.

To be ready to return to competition, be sure that your partner is handling this reconditioning and recovering well. If you are closer to the four (4) week mark of missed training, be sure to take a few weeks to assess your horse's fitness level by starting out with an easier schedule and increasing exercise time and intensity every 2-3 days. On average, it takes approximate four (4) weeks for a horse to start to lose their fitness.

Advice from Canadian International Level Riders:

Below is a synopsis of some of the advice that Canadian international level athletes have come up with to help your return to competition. The following is a collaborative effort that includes many opinions that have a similar goal in mind. This is based off of a 4-6 week absence from a full training program. Adjust accordingly if you have missed more or less time than 4-6 weeks.

Training Level or Below:

- 7-10 days of walking, hacking and stretching;
- 7-10 days of training on the flat (mostly trotting) and ground poles (if ready);
- 7-10 days of trots sets and grid work with canter introduced; and then,
- 7-10 days of regular conditioning with jumping and some galloping if necessary.

Gallop sets are generally not necessary at this level and trot sets should be enough to keep your horses fit, as long as they are 20 minutes or more.

Preliminary Level:

Similar plan as Training Level, however you should be doing one (1) day of gallop sets once you have started to get closer to a level of fitness you are comfortable with for competition.

An example would be 15 minutes of trot with 2-3 repetitions of 4-minute canter sets, working up to four (4) sets.

Intermediate and Advanced Level:

The large portion of riders and horses at this level already have a solid conditioning program in place. The only advice we would give at this point is that you should have 1-2 days per week that involve gallop sets.

Regardless of your level of competition, riders should vary the activity and intensity of their training programs so that your horses are more likely to enjoy their training. Also, you should be monitoring how your horse is recovering from and handling its current level of training on a daily basis. If you feel that your horse is too tired or not recovering well from its daily program, then you should back off or continue at the current level before increasing the intensity. Additionally, if your horse is having issues with soundness or overall performance, we recommend that you consult with your veterinarian or trainer before making any changes or increasing the intensity.



2.6 JUMPING (INCLUDING HUNTER/JUMPER)

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Alan Manning and Dayton Gorsline as reconditioning guidelines and sample training plans for horses in disciplines that include jumping.

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Hunter/Jumper Considerations:

The hunter/jumper disciplines are quite different from each other in terms of the fitness level required for competition. Fitness level also depends on the level the horse and rider compete at for both disciplines. Hunters generally require less fitness and time for reconditioning compared to a jumper. Initially, both disciplines will require a basic level of training on the flat and conditioning before starting to ride over fences. The longer the horse has been off training, the more extensive the time to regain fitness and the slower the progress will be.

Depending on the amount of time off, horses would require at least 2-4 weeks of training on the flat before starting to jump. Basic exercises for training on the flat can be found in [Section 2.1 Dressage](#).

Sample Timelines:

- **Weeks 0-2:** Training on the flat. Walk/trot. Starting with 15 minutes and adding 5-10 minutes of trot per week.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Start canter conditioning and add lateral work at the trot; increase collection exercises; also, gradually increase canter and then add circles and simple changes.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Start pole exercises on ground; trot rails and canter single poles. Basic training on the flat is required to increase cardiovascular and muscle fitness, as well as strengthen ligaments and tendons to prevent injury.
- **Weeks 4+ (approx.):** Start over fences and increase dynamics of training on the flat.

Conditioning Considerations:

- Once moderate fitness is achieved, can start work on flying changes and more high-end movement such as leg yielding, tight circles, etc.
- Need to make sure footing is not too deep and not too firm to help prevent injury when legging your horse up.
- Need to have a good baseline fitness level before starting to jump to prevent injury. Work up to exercising 5-6 days per week if possible.



-
- Advanced horses will require less exercise to regain fitness due to muscle memory and athleticism. If horses are pressed too quickly, injury may result, as well as mental and/or behavioural issues.
 - Once a moderate level of fitness is obtained, start to work on shortening and lengthening strides at trot and canter.
 - The rider, along with trainer, will have to decide at which level to start the horse's training and how fast to progress; not all horses will develop at the same level.

Jumping Considerations:

- Need to have a good baseline fitness level in conjunction with training before starting to jump.
- Both hunter and jumper disciplines should start with grid exercises, trotting in with trot rails or a single rail before the first fence.
- Usually do grid exercises every second day to increase fitness.
- Start with a single fence in the grid and work up to three fences over a period of two (2) weeks (increase size and difficulty gradually, adding oxers when ready).
- Distances should be normal for each horse.
- Can add an oxer into third fence.
- After two (2) weeks of grid exercises, start to add single fences at a height suitable for your horse.
- Gradually add in fences until a full course is obtained, at relative height.
- Grid exercises with bounces and other more difficult combinations should not be used until horse is jumping for at least two (2) weeks, as they will require more muscle development and athleticism.
- When riding courses, give your horse recovery time between rounds to rest and recoup. This can be easily accomplished with having 2-3 people in lessons.
- Once you have worked up to doing courses, schooling twice a week should be sufficient.

Cross-Training Considerations (prevents over-exercise):

- Hacking and hill work are extremely good to increase the conditioning of your hunter/jumper. It also increases fitness without the stress of jumping and is great for both the horse and rider's mindset.
- Horses that are in moderate level fitness and almost at high level fitness will require less training and conditioning before becoming competition ready.
- Hunters in full training programs should be doing ~30 minutes conditioning total, whereas jumpers can do up to one (1) hour of conditioning per day.
- It is important to check your conditioning and training program with your coach at regular intervals along the way.
- Hunters require a lower level of fitness to compete. Too much lunging to quiet them down is a vicious circle that just increases their fitness level and can lead to repetitive injury.
- Jumpers require a higher level of fitness due to the athleticism required, especially when competing against the clock.

Further Considerations:

If fortunate enough to compete, it is recommended to:

- Start competing at a lower level initially and then, once ready, move up levels;
- Plan a day off in between showing, show no more than two (2) weeks at a time; and,
- Ensure vaccinations, vet work and farrier work are up to date.



-
- Review [Section 2.1 Dressage](#), which has a very good section on cardiovascular health and strength conditioning with the end goal of good horsemanship to keep us on the right path; and,
 - Always consult with your coach.

Put your horse's health and welfare first so that when we can show again, we do so with fit and healthy horses. We empathize with everyone eager to get back into the ring; however, we must do it correctly to perform at the highest standard and prevent injury.

2.7 REINING

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Yves Rossier as reconditioning guidelines and sample training plans for horses in reining.

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Reining performance relies on obedience, suppleness, strength and power, as well as mental confidence.

Suggested Reconditioning Timelines:

- If you are starting from zero fitness: all four phases (8-12 weeks) will have to be done.
- If you are starting from baseline fitness: one (1) week of Phase 2, three (3) weeks of Phase 3, two (2) weeks of Phase 4.
- If you are starting from moderate fitness: two (2) weeks of Phase 3 and two (2) weeks of Phase 4.
- If you are starting from high fitness: two (2) weeks of Phase 4.

The general reconditioning steps, if you start after a break of more than 12 weeks, can be based on the following phases:

- **Phase 1:** Slow exercise, mostly at the walk or trot, either under saddle or lunging for one (1) week.
- **Phase 2:** General exercise and cardiovascular exercises (general riding, no maneuvers) for four (4) weeks.
- **Phase 3:** Gradual return to reining-specific exercises (maneuvers) for 3-4 weeks.
- **Phase 4:** Competition readiness and preparation conditioning including:
 - Consistent reining maneuvers for 2-3 weeks; and,
 - Competition reining partial pattern practice and skill enhancement for two (2) weeks.



The most important aspect of reconditioning an established (i.e. trained in previous years) competition horse is to allow enough time for general physical fitness preparation **before** maneuvers are introduced.

A well-trained reining horse will want to do maneuvers when they start being ridden again but they will not be ready to do so, mentally or physically, until they have undergone a general reconditioning program for 5-6 weeks. Additionally, maneuvers will have to be introduced gradually and progressively. A complete reining pattern should never be attempted in the reconditioning phase.

The **biggest danger lies in training reining maneuvers too soon**, as this can lead not only to physical injury (mostly limbs and lameness) but also to mental stress and anxiety/anticipation or poor performance when you reach competition.

Reining maneuvers require great strength, balance and suppleness to be executed with confidence by the horse and this will take approximately 12 weeks to achieve before returning to competition if you start from scratch.

Sample Reining Horse Reconditioning Schedule:

(Written in collaboration with Lise Roy, EC certified High Performance 1 Coach.)

- **Week 1:** Walk/trot the first few days, some cantering can be added on days 4-7, with increases of 5 minutes per day up to 30 minutes per day (lunging or under saddle).
- **Weeks 2-5:** General riding (up to 60 minutes per day without maneuvers for four (4) weeks):
 - All three gaits, mostly straight lines and large circles, transitions, leg yielding.
- **Weeks 6-10:** Gradual introduction of reining maneuvers:
 - Pivots leading into spins, side steps, lead changes, speed transitions, backups, small circles, roll backs and stops.
- **Weeks 10-12:** Competition readiness preparation: 60 minutes conditioning daily, at least 5 days per week:
 - All reining maneuvers including run ups/downs, hesitations.
- **Weeks 12+:** Competition preparation conditioning:
 - Practice competition partial reining patterns and skills; and,
 - Mental and physically recovery from competition (3-4 days) after difficult training or a competition (if in competition season).

Allow for mental and physical recovery from competition (3-4 days) after difficult training or a competition (if in competition season).

2.8 VAULTING

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Hilary Clayton with assistance by EC certified Instructor, Deborah Bentzen, as reconditioning guidelines and sample training plans for horses in vaulting.

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In vaulting, the horse canters in a slow, steady rhythm on circles with a minimum diameter of 15 metres at a heart rate of ~120 beats per minute for periods of 1-6 minutes. Almost all vaulting competitions are performed on the left rein. Since the competitive requirements are very limited, the conditioning program should ensure that the vaulting horse has a diverse exercise schedule that includes gaits other than the canter that exercises the horse in both directions.

In vaulting competitions, the horse's performance is scored based on quality of movement and behaviour. The horse's score makes a significant contribution to the final score.

Many vaulting horses have maintained condition during the COVID-19 restrictions. For others, restrictions on traveling to use indoor arenas has resulted in an inability to exercise or train. Also, many vaulting horses are older and have chronic conditions that require regular maintenance. Many barns have prohibited visits by paramedical professionals, such as chiropractors and equine body workers, during the period of COVID-19 restrictions, so it has not been possible to maintain the horses optimally.

Competitive vaulting horses require baseline fitness with the ability to:

- Exercise for 4-6 days per week;
- Exercise for 30 minutes per workout; and,
- Canter continuously for periods of at least six (6) minutes.

Regardless of the amount of time the vaulting horse has been out of training, the following reconditioning program is suitable to restore discipline-specific baseline fitness:

Week 1:

- Ridden exercise of 15 minutes of walking per day for four (4) days including transitions to halt, rein back and leg yield at walk.

Week 2:

- Ridden exercise of 30 minutes of walking per day for four (4) days with up to two (2) minutes trotting divided into periods of about 20 seconds. Include large (20 metre) circles and easy lateral work at walk and trot.

Week 3:

- Ridden exercise of 30 minutes of walking per day for three (3) days and up to two (2) minutes trotting and two (2) minutes cantering divided into periods of about 30 seconds. Decrease circle diameter to 15 metres as the horse develops the strength and coordination needed to bend correctly. Increase the number of transitions. Two (2) days per week, lunge at walk, trot and canter for 15 minutes.



Week 4:

- Ridden exercise of 30 minutes walking per day for three (3) days and up to a total of 10 minutes trotting and cantering split into shorter segments. Increase the number of transitions between consecutive gaits (halt-walk, walk-trot, trot-canter) and changes of speed within the gaits to develop strength and balance. 2-3 days per week, lunge with increasing amounts of canter.

After establishing a baseline level of fitness and the ability to canter for several minutes continuously on the lunge, the focus is on cross-training to vary the type of conditioning. Typically, a vaulting horse will be used for vaulting about three (3) times per week, which is sufficient to maintain the horse in competition ready condition. In addition, the horse will be schooled under saddle about twice a week with a focus on roundness, suppleness and bending. Cross-training is a very important component of regular training and conditioning and should include a variety of activities including poles, gymnastics and trail riding incorporating different types of terrain and footing.

3. Biosecurity

Biosecurity at the farm level can be defined as management practices designed to reduce the introduction of diseases onto a farm and minimize their spread within and off the farm. Developing a farm or facility biosecurity plan involves achieving the right balance between mitigating disease risk and prevention. Details on developing and maintaining a biosecurity plan are provided in the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency \(CFIA\) National Farm and Facility Level Biosecurity Standard for the Equine Sector](#).

Please check with your Provincial/Territorial Sport Organization (PTSO) for any additional biosecurity materials that may be available. It is helpful to have knowledge of horse and human diseases, modes of transmission and protection methods for horses and people. This information and more are included in the CFIA User Guide that accompanies the National Farm and Facility Level Biosecurity Standard for the Equine Sector. Along with these resources, work with your farm or facility veterinarian and industry experts on developing a biosecurity plan that is appropriate for your operation.

The following posters can be printed and displayed around the barn to help communicate biosecurity protocols:

[Disease Prevention - Horses](#)

[Disease Prevention - Equipment / Supplies](#)

[Tips to Protect Your Horse Away from Home](#)

[Managing New, Visiting & Returning Horses at Your Facility](#)

3.1 ADDITIONAL EC COVID-19 RESOURCES

EC has worked with industry experts to create recommendations for equestrian facility operations in the COVID-19 landscape.

Please note: We recommend following all current local, provincial/territorial and federal recommendations and directives. Horse and human safety are paramount when making amendments to common horse and human interaction routines.



The [Return to Business Operations Framework](#) is designed as a framework for equine and equestrian facilities to develop a return to business operations plan based on protocols provided by provincial/territorial and federal health organizations. Facilities that develop a plan based on this framework will be prepared to resume operations as soon as provincial/territorial and federal legislation allows.

Additional resources relating to COVID-19 can be found at www.equestrian.ca/industry/about/covid-19-resources.

