

LOOSEN UP!

Hip flexibility is key to achieving a correct, effective seat

BY JENNIFER M. MILLER



There is no question that flexibility and range of motion in the hip joints impact a dressage rider's seat. Hip tightness can produce stiffness and the dreaded "chair seat," which we'll explain in more detail in this article. Most riders can benefit from understanding the causes of hip tightness and ways to improve range of motion for greater stability in the saddle.

Medical Causes

"There can be any number of reasons for hip tightness," says Pilates instructor and certified Resistance Stretch instructor Lisa Carusone, of Weston, MA. A graduate of the Duke Integrative Medicine Integrative Health Coach Professional Training Program, Carusone is also qualified to teach TRX and TRX for rehabilitation, and she is a competitive dressage rider.

"When a client tells me that she or her trainer suspects tight hips, I try to rule out medical issues before plunging into exercise," says Carusone, who names arthritis, bone cysts, labral tears, and bursitis as common health-related culprits. Riders with these issues, as well as those who have had hip-replacement surgery, need to consult with a physician first, she says.

Carusone's client Louisa McKown, of Concord, MA, has rheumatoid arthritis, a chronic inflammation of the joints. In addition to medical treatment for her condition, regular exercise has improved her position in the saddle—and made her stronger and her pony happier, McKown says.

"Being aware of how much one's position influences the horse is incredibly important," says McKown. "I cannot blame my pony for the way his body behaves if I am causing his problems. When I correct my position problems, he always benefits, and I feel the difference."

"If we can get the body working properly, we can try to slow the arthritic process down by strengthening the muscles around the joints," says Chicago-based Jennifer Kotylo, a certified Core Dynamics Pilates instructor, a Level 2 Equilates instructor in both Pilates and riding tracks, a certified Balimo instructor, and a USDF L Program graduate with distinction.

Even if you have a medical issue that causes hip tightness, don't assume you're doomed to ride poorly. One of Kotylo's clients, Amanda Johnson, Franklin, WI, is a successful dressage professional and has earned her USDF gold medal despite "problems with my right hip and right knee."

An MRI diagnosed the causes of Johnson's pain: a labral hip tear and tendinosis (chronic tendon injury) of the gluteus minimus and medius.

"They think that my body was compensating for the tear, building incorrect muscle memory, which eventually impacted my knee," Johnson says. With the help of Kotylo and her

DEEPEN YOUR SEAT: An assisted hip stretch, as demonstrated by Pilates and Equilates instructor Jennifer Kotylo, can help in overcoming a "chair seat"

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SEAT COMPARISON: *Correct dressage seat (top) shows proper shoulder-hip-heel alignment. In the chair seat (above), the seat is pushed too far back, the legs are drawn forward and up, and the rider is not balanced over her seat bones.*

physical therapist, Johnson has learned how to move more symmetrically and to engage her core to support her movements, both of which lessen the tear's impact on her body.

Lifestyle Causes

"I think lifestyle is a major contributor to hip tightness," says Carusone. Long hours spent sitting in cars and at desks can cause hip-flexor muscles to shorten and tighten. If you have a long driving commute, you may even notice a hip/pelvic imbalance as a result of the repetitive motions of using one foot on the gas and brake pedals. Extended periods of sitting (or standing), wearing high heels, or even holding a baby or toddler on your hip can contribute to hip issues and tightness.

"I am on my feet all day for my job as a surgeon, often standing in the same place for six to eight hours," says Carusone's client Bonnie Padwa, a USDF bronze and silver medalist from Brookline, MA. Padwa combats the resulting stiffness in her hip flexors and tendency toward a chair seat by stretching every morning and before each ride.

"Everyone's hip joints are constructed slightly differently, so there is a conformation component to range of motion," Kotylo says. "Most people have the innate ability to have good range of motion, but they don't use it day to day. Your hips can rotate, move forward and back and from side to side, but most of us never put them through their paces. And as the old saying goes, move it or lose it!"

Remaining in the same position for long periods of time limits our motion and causes soft-tissue tightness and stiffness, Kotylo explains. "If the muscles, tendons, ligaments, and fascia [connective-tissue fibers] surrounding the hip area don't get used, they 'forget' how to work properly. But like *The Wizard of Oz's* Tin Man, even if we are stuck in one position for a long time, we can regain almost all inherent range of motion."

The Chair Seat Explained

"The hip is a ball-and-socket joint that helps us to move, go up and down stairs, and for sport-specific movement, like riding," says Carusone. The hip joint has six major movement capabilities: flexion (lifting the leg, as in going up stairs), extension (bringing the leg back, as in preparing to kick a ball), adduction (moving the leg inward, toward the other leg), abduction (moving the leg outward and to the side), medial rotation (turning the leg in from the hip), and lateral rotation (turning the leg

Rider-position photos on this page and hip-stretch photo on p. 42 from *A Gymnastic Riding System Using Mind, Body & Spirit* by Betsy Steiner with Jennifer O. Bryant. Reprinted by permission of Trafalgar Square Books. Available from HorseAndRiderBooks.com and as a downloadable e-book from most e-book sellers.

out from the hip). There are 17 muscles involved in producing these various hip movements, Carusone says.

When a dressage rider sits correctly, her seat is balanced over her legs with her shoulders, hips, and heels aligned. The “chair seat” describes the position fault that occurs when the legs are extended in front of the seat and drawn up, as if the rider were sitting in a chair (photos, facing page). According to Carusone, tightness in the muscles that bring our legs into forward motion is often a contributing factor to the chair seat. The quadriceps—the big muscles of the upper legs at the fronts of the thighs—are typically shortened and tight in riders with this position fault, while the gluteal (buttocks) muscles are lengthened and weak. The shorter, stronger muscles controlling the hip overpower the longer, weaker ones. As a result, the leg is drawn up toward the body and the hip angle closes.

Improve Your Seat with Body Conditioning

Assuming your tight hips are not the result of a medical issue and that you have your doctor’s OK to exercise, there are things you can do to loosen up.

“I find that most riders need more overall strength and stamina, both cardiovascular and muscular,” says Carusone. “They need to maintain their suppleness and flexibility, including the muscles that work the hip joints.”

Carusone employs a mixture of strength training, plyo-

It’s Not You: Other Causes of a Chair Seat

Although rider hip tightness is a likely cause of a chair seat, this incorrect position can also be caused by external factors, says fitness professional and dressage rider Lisa Carusone. Two possible culprits to check:

Saddle fit and balance. If your saddle does not fit you and your horse correctly, your position will be affected. If the seat is not level (i.e., the pommel is too high and the cantle is too low), the rider will find it nearly impossible to maintain a balanced position.

Horse/rider fit. If your horse’s barrel is wider than your hips can comfortably accommodate, you will feel discomfort. Petite and short-legged riders may be more prone to this issue. Note that barrel size is not necessarily related to horse height: Some riders may actually be more comfortable on a taller, narrower horse than a shorter, stockier one.

metrics (“jump training”), and speed/agility work to help her equestrian clients build stamina, develop better balance, and preserve flexibility. A certified Pilates instructor, she notes that this method of core-focused conditioning incorporating balance and flexibility training is great for riders. In fact, many riders have embraced Pilates, most prominently the FEI-level rider/trainer and international competitor (and current USDF Adult Clinic Series co-presenter) Betsy Steiner. Steiner, of Frenchtown, NJ, and Loxahatchee, FL, built on material in her book *A Gymnastic Riding System Using Mind, Body & Spirit* to develop Equilates, a Pilates-based exercise and body-awareness program for equestrians.

Kotylo, herself an Equilates instructor, also recommends acupuncture to help release tight muscles; using small Yamuna Body Rolling balls or Franklin Method balls under the glutes and up the back can also help release tension, she adds. She is also certified to teach the use of the Balimo (the name is an acronym for *Balance in Motion*), a special stool with a free-moving seat designed by German sports physiologist Eckart Meyners. Balimo work can help users develop a fuller range of pelvic movement, including in the hips and lower back, Kotylo says. Complementary methods Carusone likes include yoga and Gyrotonic, both of which emphasize stretching and flexibility. Massage, chiropractic, and even acupuncture may also be of benefit, she says. She also recommends Structural Integration (“Rolfing”), which she describes as a method of body work that impacts the fascia and addresses muscle imbalances. She adds that some hip-tightness sufferers have found relief when they adopted a healthful diet designed to reduce inflammation.

Managing tight hips is an ongoing process, and it becomes increasingly important as we age. Johnson, the dressage pro who has battled injuries, reports that “stretching decreases my pain and allows me to be more elastic while riding, and exercise helps maintain my endurance in the saddle.”

Saddle up, Loosen up: Mounted Exercises

While you ride, you can let the combined effects of your horse and gravity work their magic to help loosen your hips, Kotylo says. Start while you’re walking to warm up by taking your feet out of the stirrups and relaxing your legs down and around your horse’s sides. (As with all mounted exercises, if you’re not sure whether your horse will be OK with the activities, check first with a reputable instructor.) The movement from his hind legs as he walks will push your pelvis forward “through” your hips, stretching the soft tissues with every step.

Try an assisted stretch when you’re in the saddle: At a



RIGHT & WRONG: Aboard the 17-year-old Hanoverian Nimo, Amanda Johnson demonstrates correct and incorrect form during an assisted hip stretch. In photo 1, Amanda maintains a correct neutral pelvic angle while Jennifer Kotylo gently pulls her leg down and back. In photo 2, Amanda has allowed her pelvis and lower back to arch. In this position, the hip stretch is ineffective and the rider's lower back is compressed.

halt, take one leg out of the stirrup and have a helper gently pull your leg down and back. “The trick to this is not to let your pelvis come along for the ride,” Kotylo says. “It should stay upright while your leg moves or you will compress your lower back and not really stretch your hip.”

Although mounted exercises can help, Carusone would prefer that her clients be strong, stretched, and ready to ride when they get on. “Riding challenges, like hip tightness, where you need to be stronger and more flexible, should be addressed before you put a foot in the stirrup,” she says.

That said, we asked each of our experts to recommend her favorite unmounted moves for easing hip tightness. Consult your physician before exercising if you have medical issues, and stop and check with your doctor if any movement causes pain.

Jennifer Kotylo’s 5 Ways to Increase Hip Range of Motion

Knee sways. Wearing comfortable clothing, lie on your back on the floor with your knees bent and your legs to-



KNEE SWAYS: Jennifer Kotylo demonstrates this passive stretching movement

gether. If your neck is uncomfortable, place a small pillow under your head. Let your legs fall to one side and then the other. Don’t force the movement; just allow your legs to move back and forth. This motion moves the ball of your leg around in your hip socket. You should feel a stretch through your hips and lower back.

Knee circles. Lying on your back with your knees bent, make sure that your ankles, knees, and hips are in alignment. Place a pillow under your head if your neck is uncomfortable. Keeping your knees bent, lift one leg and hold it behind your thigh with your hands. Use your hands to “stir” your leg within the hip socket, making small circles. Circle the leg in both directions for a minute or two. Repeat with the opposite leg.

Ankle rocking. Stand with your legs about hip distance apart. If you have balance issues, hold onto something stable. Practice shifting your weight to various parts of your feet: toes, heels, outside of the foot, inside of the foot. Play with these various stances for a couple of minutes. Yes, your ankles are getting a workout, but so are your hips. For an added challenge, walk around while changing how



KNEE CIRCLES: Jennifer “stirs” her leg within the hip socket



CLAMSHELLS: Starting with legs together, Jennifer and Amanda lift and lower just their knees like clamshells opening and closing

you stand on your feet. If you place your hands on your hip joints, you will feel how much your hips are moving in their sockets.

Squatting circles. Standing with your legs together, squat down slightly and place your hands on your thighs. Keeping your hands on your thighs and your knees bent, circle your knees first in one direction, then the other. This exercise supples your hips, knees, ankles, and lower back. Circle each way for one to two minutes.

Clamshells. Lie on the floor on your side with your pelvis perpendicular to the floor. Stack your legs one atop the other, and bend your knees. Keeping your feet touching, slowly lift and lower your top knee like a clamshell opening and closing. Raise your leg only to the level where it naturally wants to go; don't force it. Raise and lower approximately

10 times; then roll to your other side and repeat the exercise with the opposite leg.

Lisa Carusone's Exercises for Hip Strength and Flexibility

Develop flexibility with the following moves:

Supine femur rotation. Lie on your back with knees bent and your arms out to the side at a 45-degree angle (arms below shoulders), palms up. (Do all supine exercises on a mat on the floor or other firm surface. A bed or couch is not a sufficiently firm surface.) Straighten one leg, tighten the thigh, and flex your foot by pulling your toes back. Imagine you are standing on that extended leg. Now rotate the extended leg internally and externally (roll inward, back

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Be Neutral

Both in riding and in your daily activities, your pelvis should be in a neutral position most of the time: perpendicular to the ground and not tipped forward or backward, says Pilates and Equilates instructor and USDF L graduate with distinction Jennifer Kotylo.

Keeping the pelvis neutral requires both concentration (it's easy to slump or tip forward when we're not paying attention to our posture) and core strength. "If your core can help support the body's weight, your hips will have less to handle," she says.

When you stand, help to keep your pelvis properly aligned by staying "up out of your hips," Kotylo says. Create proper alignment and a tall, elegant posture by thinking about creating more space in and around the hip joint, she says.



QUAD STRETCH: *This stretch improves flexibility of the hip flexors and the large muscle (quadriceps) at the front of your thigh*

to center, and outward). The movement should come from your hip, not your foot. Do two sets of 10 rotations on each leg. **Caution:** Don't do this exercise if you have had a hip replacement.

Side-lying quad stretch. Lie on your side with your knees soft and slightly drawn in toward your body. Clasp the foot of your top leg with your top hand; then gently draw that top leg back. You should feel a big stretch in the front of your top leg. Hold for 15 seconds and repeat two more times before repeating with the opposite leg. **Caution:** Don't do this stretch if you have existing knee pain or have been diagnosed with any injury to the knee joint.

Try the following exercises to build hip and glute strength and to increase hip-flexor flexibility:

Pilates side kicks. This exercise is one of four to six moves that make up the full Pilates side-kick series. Lie on your side with your legs straight and slightly in front of the vertical, head resting on your arm or a folded towel (beginner/intermediate version); or with legs straight, head propped up on your hand, ribs lifted slightly off the mat (advanced version).

Lift your top leg to hip height. Engage your abdominal muscles and bring your top leg forward, still at hip height. Stop when your leg reaches a right angle to your body. Then bring your leg back through your starting point and behind you. Keep your abs engaged and squeeze your gluteal muscle on the top side as your leg moves past the starting point for this exercise. You should feel your glutes and the tops of your hamstrings working during this exercise. If you feel it in your low back, you have lost abdominal control and your leg is swinging too far behind you, you are not engaging your glu-

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recognize
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SIDE KICK: This "right angle" move is part of the Pilates side-kick series

teal muscles as your leg moves back behind you, or both. Do one set of eight back-and-forth reps on each leg.

Hip, Hip, Hooray!

At any age, stage, or skill level, most dressage riders strive to attain a more effective seat. Correctly functioning hip joints and balanced, supportive hip musculature are keys to im-

Learn from Our Expert at the USDF Convention

Fitness pro Jennifer Kotylo will lead the program "Improve Your Riding Through Movement" at next month's Adequan/USDF Annual Convention in Las Vegas. (Lisa Carusone, the other expert featured in this article, was the fitness presenter at last year's convention.)

For more information and to register, visit usdf.org/convention.

proving your riding and keeping you happily in the saddle as you get older. Take a cue from the riders profiled in this article, and talk to your doctor and a fitness professional about creating a body-conditioning program that addresses your individual issues and riding goals. ▲

The editor thanks Jennifer Kotylo and Amanda Johnson for their help with photos in this article.

Jennifer M. Miller is a freelance writer from upstate New York. Her articles have appeared in USDF Connection and Dressage Today.

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