

Horseback riding can be great exercise

Moving Grays Harbor
By Maryann Welch

While enjoying my weight lifting class in Montesano a few weeks ago, fellow participants (Dave and Ellen Foscue of Montesano) and horse enthusiasts got me thinking about the possibility of focusing one of these columns on horseback riding as a physical activity. Hmm, don't get me wrong, but I always believed that it was the horse that was getting the physical activity! Before all you equestrians throw your paper down in disgust, I admit that I am pretty uninformed when it comes to the subject of horses. I do recall being sore after I would go on a trail ride during a vacation, but never gave it too much thought as a mode of physical activity after that.

In talking with Dave and Ellen I began to realize that the benefit of horsemanship is far more than the direct results you get from enjoying an evening ride. It is the whole experience. Taking care of horses properly involves a lot of physical activity. From feeding to grooming to mucking stalls – it all requires physical exertion and therefore the expenditure of calories. The other health benefits are not to be discredited either.

After I got home from class I started to research the energy expenditure of horseback riding and I found out that you expend as many calories riding as you would golfing without a cart or walking at a leisurely pace. Of course, as I read further (and this is true for any activity), the more intensely you ride the more calories you burn. I also discovered that there are many different types of riding:

dressage; trail; jumping; gaming, etc. and each discipline requires a different muscular demand.

Ellen referred me to Meggan Crowley at the Montesano Equestrian Center to get more “technical” information. Meggan informed me that in each riding discipline the horse and rider team benefit in different ways. The horse benefits from strong muscular contractions to carry themselves and their rider and the riders benefit from toning muscles in their back, hips, stomach (the infamous “core”) and arms. They also gain flexibility in their hips, pelvic floor and sacro-iliac joints. Balance and proprioception are also greatly enhanced when you have to stabilize yourself on a moving platform.

Meggan shared that riding helps to improve coordination and focus as well as being a fun and relaxing way to get and stay fit. No wonder horseback riding has been used as a successful form of rehabilitation for individuals who have physical and/or developmental disabilities.

“Riding (and equine care in general) encompasses all aspects of health – physical, spiritual and mental” Meggan enthuses. “Riding involves all muscle groups in the body and you have to learn to control each group independently of the other without tensing up. For those who learn to ride correctly, this can be a very low impact activity that you can continue well into your “golden” years. However, you have to be willing to continue to work at riding effectively and actively.” In talking with Meggan, you can really sense that she has a deep passion for horses. In fact, many “horse people” I know feel the same way.

My hairdresser, Karisa Waber, is a Montana native and lifelong horse lover. Upon mention of my weight and spinning classes she shared her experience of a strenuous “working” session with her horse which resulted in shedding clothing layers and breaking a

sweat. Karisa realizes that if she was able to put that time in with her horse every day she would never have to visit a gym! Meggan agrees and adds that she has not seen the inside of a gym in years.

Horse involvement, especially for young people, can help develop both self-confidence and self-esteem. It has been proven in study after study (usually related to cats and dogs) that owning pets can help to lower blood pressure and stress through the companionship alone. Now, unless your horse is Mr. Ed and starts back talking, I think that this would also ring true for horses.

Another great benefit of horseback riding is that it tends to involve more than one person. As such, it can strengthen family bonds as well as provide a social context in which other bonds are formed. All in all, it seems, there are many positive health aspects associated with horses...I wonder if I can fit another hobby into my retirement (just kidding, Jim).

As you can see, staying physically active can encompass many different activities. Horseback riding and care can be a more comprehensive activity than you might have ever dreamed. As I have said before...find the activity that you have a passion for and get out there and “*get moving grays harbor*”. Happy trails!

Maryann Welch is the recently retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.