

Treadmill or Walker?

It seems like there are a lot of situations that make it difficult to turn some horses out. Whether they have an ongoing medical treatment that requires stall rest (or at least no turnout), or if the weather is poor to the point that turning out show horses is more dangerous than it's worth, or even if the horses maybe just don't like turnout, there will always be a time that turnout can't happen. What are we supposed to do with our horses on days like these? It seems like leaving them stuck in their stalls all day isn't the end of the world, but obviously for many days on end this isn't a good answer. Hand walking is a great option too, but it is time-consuming and requires staff or helpers to make it a reality if you can't be there all day. Arena turnout is something that some facilities will allow, but it can be difficult to work in a schedule around riding times in the arena, or for safety reasons if there are mirrors in the arena it is strongly recommended that arena turnout be skipped. A treadmill or an exerciser (hot-walker) can be very useful to solve these issues – both can help alleviate the time consuming part of hand walking each horse, and they also both offer training and fitness benefits that are essentially unmatched by the alternatives.

Naturally there are more reasons to buy a treadmill or walker than simply for days that the horses can't be turned out.

They are useful on a daily basis for rehabilitation, exercising, improving fitness, warming up prior to work, cooling down after work, and many other applications. When choosing between a treadmill and a walker, there are three major areas of comparison that will facilitate this decision for your specific circumstances: space requirements, safety and maintenance, and functionality.



Space Requirements

It is clear that the treadmill is the smaller option of the two. There are several companies that manufacture equine treadmills, and individual dimensions will vary slightly between the brands, but the unit itself is usually around 5.6m long (including on/off ramps) and 1.8m wide. In order to accommodate the height of a horse on the treadmill, a ceiling height of 3.05m is normally recommended for the structure in which the treadmill is placed.

A walker has very different space requirements. Though there are many customized and unique walkers available, a standard model operates based on a circle. A track is built for the horses to follow around this circle, with partitions separating the horses. Four or six horse models are relatively common, and the diameter of the six horse model is larger. Anywhere from 12.2m to 20m in diameter is needed for a typical walker.

Depending on the stable that will be using these items, it's possible to fit a treadmill in and around existing structures, maybe even in a relatively calm hallway. A walker generally needs a separate structure of its own, and may require a breezeway to connect the walker to the rest of the stable. Infrastructure costs can definitely be higher with a walker.

In both cases, some electrical work will be required to power the treadmill and the motor of the walker. This is not normally a big deal, and because it is needed for both the treadmill and the walker, it won't be a deciding factor when making a decision, it is more something of note.

Safety and Maintenance

There are a few key safety concerns for both the treadmill and the walker. When a horse is on the treadmill, they are led up a fairly narrow ramp on to the treadmill belt. A bar is secured both in front and behind the horse, to help ensure that the horse stays on the belt and doesn't drift backwards off the belt or charge ahead and off the belt in front. The horse is also cross-tied to keep them looking forwards. All of these are just to keep the horse in the right place. When the treadmill is running, there are several sensors to detect the horse. There is a sensor under the belt, such that if the horse spooks, trips, starts trotting or cantering, or generally takes too heavy or severe of a stride, the treadmill will shut down. Additionally there is a sensor that detects the presence of the horse on the unit through a simple laser beam. If the beam is broken (by the horse's body), the belt continues; if the beam is able to connect, normally if a horse tripped and fell, or also to ensure safety for humans cleaning or performing maintenance when there are no horses on the belt, the treadmill shuts down. These safety features certainly ease some major concerns about having horses tied in place above a bunch of moving parts.

With that said, the treadmill still requires constant monitoring. A person needs to be stationed at the treadmill, or at least within a few metres, to hit one of the many emergency stop buttons should the sensors not activate properly in the event of a major issue.

A walker, in its design, does not require tying the horses to anything. A motor turns the partitions, and the horses will move away from the rotating partitions by their own accord. Some models can be electrified for those wily horses that tend to lean on partitions, or even stand still and allow the partitions to scrape up and over them. If the partitions are electrified, there is an obvious safety concern for any person or horse nearby. Normally the walker is set on a timer, and the motor will turn (and reverse directions if programmed) until the timer stops. During the time of operation, there is much less supervision required. While someone should still be relatively close by, it is less imperative to feel restricted to one spot for the duration of the machine's operation, as with the treadmill.

As the walker can hold several horses at once, some planning about where to put certain horses behind or in front of others is important to avoid any potential confrontations while walking.

Some models of walker have a rudimentary motor in the centre of the circle, with walls and partitions built around it, while other models have the motor above the partitions to leave an open space in the centre of the circle. An electrical control box is stationed near the entry, which is used to set the timer and reverse program. All of the parts are fairly easy to access, meaning that any maintenance needed is fairly straightforward.

A treadmill consists of many, if not most, of its parts internally. The belt and electrical control box are easy to access, but the motor, steering rollers, and lubricant dispensing system are essentially hidden under the machine. This makes maintenance quite difficult and time-consuming, as many pieces may need to be removed to perform maintenance, and then replaced afterwards.

Functionality

As earlier stated, the treadmill can only accommodate one horse at a time, while the walker can accommodate four or six horses in most typical models. If there are several horses to go on the treadmill or walker each day, there are obvious time-saving advantages to the walker.

The treadmill operates in a straight line. In fact, a fairly narrow straight line, as the belt is less than 1.0m wide. This is useful to encourage straightness in the horse's movement as well as consistency and focus. This becomes especially useful in the winter months when most horses and riders are restricted to smaller indoor arenas that require more turning and less ability to travel straight.

Some walkers can operate at a high enough speed to allow for horses to trot. This is an added benefit to the walkers, as horses can work as much or as little as desired, including the trot. While there are some treadmills that can accommodate race horses galloping, there are currently no treadmills that can do the same, or even trot, with warmbloods aboard.

Perhaps one of the most important advantages of the treadmill is its capability to incline the belt, such that horses can walk uphill. Including hill-work is a very important part of overall fitness and strength, and this is not always easy to do when riding, even in the summer time.

It is difficult to characterize a final ranking of a treadmill versus a walker, as every horseperson's particular needs will differ, as will their existing infrastructure and capacity to accommodate additions. Costs will depend on the amount of work needed to build necessary structures as well as the brand of treadmill or walker (and size of walker).

It is important to consider the goal of the fitness modality – is it important to improve horse's overall fitness, or to get a multitude of horses out of their stalls every day, or any other goal you may have. Perhaps in a perfect world one could have both a treadmill and a walker to cover all bases. But in the event that isn't possible, be sure to consider all of the factors that can affect your decision as you do what is best for your horses.