



NO HOOF, NO HORSE

This saying should be permanently imprinted in the minds of horse owners, so that regular hoof care is maintained on their Equine friends. Although some horses appear to need minimal attention to maintain their hooves in good condition, most horses will develop problems if left unattended. These problems can be painful, like foot abscesses, or cause bony and ligament problems further up the leg that can shorten the functional life of a horse, such as when the foot is not kept balanced.

In the wild, horses are able to roam, moving to high ground during periods of wet weather conditions, or onto lush floodplains to feed when the conditions allow. Their hooves are maintained by their roaming and grazing habits. Most wild horses cover 20km per day looking for pasture and water, and in doing so keep their bodyweight down through constant activity. Less bodyweight means less stress on their hooves. During their roaming, their hooves will be wetted temporarily when they go to waterholes to drink, or cross creeks, and will often be subject to abrasive surfaces in the course of a days roaming. This action of keeping the hoof from drying out and constantly “filing” the weight bearing surfaces down on abrasive surfaces effectively maintains the hoof shape and balance, reducing crack formation and leads to barefoot wild horses having tough compact feet.

Compare this to the management practices most horse owners are restricted to employ. Firstly, we confine our horses to smaller paddocks, and often deny them the ability to escape unfavourable conditions. If it's constantly wet, they may be standing in mud or wet grass for prolonged periods. This can affect the hooves adversely by softening the hoof wall, saturating the coronary band, and, if the hooves have any cracks in them, allow mud and organic material to track up into the sensitive tissues and cause foot abscesses. The health of the coronary band (or coronet) is extremely important to hoof health because the hoof wall grows down from the coronary band – it has the “stem cells” of the hoof wall, and if the coronet is damaged, the hoof wall below it will be abnormal. The signs of this may be rings around the hoof wall, and/or cracks or deficits in the hoof wall starting at the coronet.

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Paddocked horses that aren't exercising regularly will often become overweight and unfit, which will put greater stresses on their hooves compared to wild horses. Overweight horses are also prone to laminitis (or "founder"), a painful condition of the hoof which causes permanent hoof damage unless attended to early in its course.

In dry conditions or in areas where the ground is hard and shaly, the hooves can often dry out too much, becoming brittle and, if not trimmed regularly, develop cracks which again can allow foot abscesses to occur, especially if a rain event occurs and softens the ground. Avoiding foot abscesses is really important because they are extremely painful, will cause laminitis in the hoof, and can break out at the coronary band, leading to permanent hoof wall damage and cracks. Severe recurrent hoof abscesses can lead to infection in the pedal bone, which nearly always need surgery to treat adequately.

With all this in mind, what are the best ways to maintain good hoof health?

Firstly, be aware! You miss more by not looking, than not knowing. Take ownership of the responsibility to maintain your horses hoof health. Check your horse's hooves. If you don't know what you are looking at, find a text or article which describes how the hoof should look, or get advice from your Farrier or Vet. Generally, the front hooves should look the same as each other (ie left and right or near and off) when looking from in front and from the side, but will look slightly different from the back hooves, which should also look the same as each other. There are so many details involved in determining what is normal that it is beyond the scope of this article. However, for a brief assessment, normal hooves should be free of cracks, should have the "frogs" in contact with the ground surface, and the slope of the walls when looking from side on should be continuous with the pastern angle, and should not "splay" out

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closer to the ground. The soles of the feet should be slightly concave, so that the walls are the weight bearing surface, not the sole.

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Secondly, find a good Farrier, and consider getting the advice of an experienced Veterinarian. They may advise you to paint certain oils on the hoof wall regularly to prevent them drying out or becoming saturated. Performance horses will more than likely be regularly shod. An astute owner will always check the balance and condition of their horses feet between shoeing, so that the farrier can be made aware early if problems arise.

Some horse with problem feet benefit from Veterinary examination and taking xrays. Xrays can be a valuable to Farriers to help them maintain the balance of the hoof.

Given that wild horses maintain their hooves every day with their roaming, just relying on trimming the hooves every 6-8 weeks may not be enough. For those owners who want to be involved, a good investment might be a hoof knife and sharp rasp, along with good advice on how to maintain the hooves between trims. However, you must have a good understanding of how to keep the hoof balanced before attempting this, so that you don't allow an imbalance to cause further hoof problems.

Thirdly, try to avoid having your horse in conditions which are not good for their hooves. Standing in mud or wet grass for prolonged periods will cause problems as outlined above.

Conversely, allowing the hooves to dry out and develop cracks will also cause problems.

Finally, avoid letting your horse becoming overweight and/or unfit. Regular exercise in the form of riding or lunging, plus careful dietary management can help reduce the risk of obesity and laminitis (or founder) developing. However, maintaining your horse in light condition by "starvation" or feed restriction may not allow your horse to maintain a healthy system, so providing a balanced diet is important.

As owners, we confine our horses to areas which may not allow them to maintain ideal hoof health. It is our responsibility to take action to prevent problems occurring.

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