

LAMENESS IN HORSES

Horse lameness is one of the most common health problems seen in horses. Two of the most common causes of horse lameness are called laminitis and navicular disease. By learning about these conditions you can catch them earlier and therefore prevent further damage. When dealing with horse lameness you have to be observant. Often time's horse lameness is temporary and goes away with just rest. Other times the lameness can be quite severe and further veterinary care is needed. Lameness is often seen when the horse is trotting. If your horse is lame you will notice a different gait to the horse. There are often a large number of signs to watch out for when dealing with a suspected lame horse.

Signs of lameness include; trotting unevenly, a reluctance to bear weight on a leg, throwing the head when trotting, and a reluctance to move. If you notice any of these signs you should contact your veterinarian immediately, and don't ride your horse. While you may be able to tell which leg is affecting the horse, the veterinarian can identify the exact location that is causing the problem.

The veterinarian will most likely start the examination with observing the horse trotting. After that they will usually start at the foot of the lame leg and work their way up the leg to pinpoint the location of the pain. When looking at the feet they look for many possible causes of lameness. It could be as simple as an incorrect shoe, or more complicated such as navicular disease or laminitis.

They will feel the hoof for any signs of heat, pain or swelling. Also, uneven wear on the hoof is another sign that there is a problem. As they work their way up the leg, they feel for any areas of heat or swelling. They also palpate the tendon and joint areas for any signs of pain.

The two most common sources of lameness originate in the foot. Laminitis is an inflammation of the hoof wall, usually caused by an improper diet or an infection. A diet too high in grain can cause laminitis. Also, an infection somewhere else on the horse's body could cause laminitis to develop in the foot.

Navicular disease, the other most common cause of lameness in horses, also affects the foot. The navicular bone is located at the back of the foot and is an area of tendon and ligament attachment. Being an area where a lot of motion happens, even the slightest inflammation can cause the horse to be lame.

By knowing what signs to look for in your horse you'll be able to detect lameness early. The best treatment is always prevention. By feeding your horse a nutritious diet and seeing a farrier and vet on a regular basis you can prevent most forms of horse lameness.

Like dogs and other animals, horses can't talk to us when they hurt. Dogs, though, will whine or whimper to indicate distress. Horses, being prey animals, don't normally make any sounds to show they hurt. Prey animals living in the wild don't want to let predators know when they're weak. What is an advantage for a wild animal is a disadvantage for a domestic one. Horse people have to learn to be very observant of their charges to be able to tell when they hurt. One of the more obvious ways a horse shows pain is by going lame.

A lame horse hurts somewhere. It's up to us to find out what's causing the pain and to see that the horse receives proper treatment for the problem. In most cases, lameness is temporary and the horse recovers with proper care. Unfortunately, if the lameness is chronic and treatment cannot keep the horse's discomfort to acceptable levels even when he's not being ridden, euthanasia is the only option.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY HORSE IS LAME?

Lameness is easiest to see when the horse is trotting. If the pain is in just one leg, you'll notice that the horse is not moving evenly. The severity can range from a barely noticeable hitch in the stride to a reluctance to put any weight on one foot.

A lame horse will often throw his head in rhythm with his stride. If the horse is sore in a front leg, he will throw his head up as the sore side touches the ground. If the lameness is in a back leg, he will lean onto the sound side. He may also drag the toe on the sore side.

If the horse hurts in either front feet or all four feet, you won't notice a limp. Instead, he will keep his head up and move with a short, stumbling stride.

A sound horse stands with front legs perpendicular to the ground. A horse that stands "camped out" instead of keeping his legs under his body is probably sore.

A relaxed horse will often rest a hind foot, but he'll keep equal weight on each front foot. A sore horse might try to take the weight off a front leg by pointing it forward with just the toe on the ground.

While an observant horse owner can recognize that a horse is lame, pinpointing the exact site and cause of the lameness is usually a job for a veterinarian.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I NOTICE THAT MY HORSE IS LAME?

Remember that a horse that is lame hurts. Don't ride a lame horse unless specifically directed to by a veterinarian.

The first thing to do is find out where your horse hurts and why. There might be an obvious wound, but more likely, it will take some detective work to find the problem. In most cases, it's best to consult your veterinarian. Calling in a veterinarian early not only saves the horse from living with pain any longer than necessary, but is usually cheaper in the long run.

WHERE SHOULD I START MY SEARCH?

NB: Always start at the bottom.

FEET.

First check for obvious causes. Pick out your horse's feet and make sure there are no stones wedged into the crevices. Look for dark spots that might indicate a bruised sole. Badly cracked feet can also cause lameness.

Have the feet just been trimmed? Were they trimmed too short? Keep your horse on soft ground until the hoof grows in. Was the horse recently shod? A nail might be too close to the sensitive structures inside the hoof or the shoe might be pinching. In either case, call your farrier.

Feel the hooves. Is one hoof hotter than the others? Feel the pulse in the artery that passes over the fetlock joint. Is it pounding? Both heat and a pounding pulse are indications of injury.

LOWER LEG

Check for heat and swelling. The horse may have injured a tendon or a ligament, similar to a sprained ankle in people. If so, your horse will need a long rest period in order to heal, just as you would with a sprained ankle.

JOINTS

The cause of the lameness may be in any of the horse's joints. Like people, horses can suffer from arthritis and bursitis. The stifle, which is the equivalent of our knee, can slip and lock. Horses subjected to overly stressful work, particularly when young, can have bone chips floating in the joints.

BACK

Many riding horses have sore backs. Even if your horse is not lame, if he objects to saddling, flinches or sinks his back when you brush it, or bucks, suspect a sore back.

Are there any particular diseases I should watch for?

Two commonly seen conditions are chronic founder and navicular disease. You should also be alert to tying up syndrome.