

The Basics Of Hoof Care

What you need to know about keeping your horses' feet healthy

It's an old saying, but still true: "No foot, no horse." As a horse owner, you may get tired of hearing it, but it should serve to remind you that a sound hoof is crucial to the health and function of the horse. Regular hoof care is one of the most important aspects of keeping a horse.

As a horse owner, it's important for you to understand why that's true, as well as how you and your farrier figure into keeping that hoof healthy. Here are some basic concepts about your horse's hoof-care needs.

The hoof is always growing. Like human fingernails, a hoof continually grows to compensate for normal wear and tear. Wild horses' feet grow and wear out at about the same rate, but the confined domestic horse's feet may grow too long if its not ridden much — and hooves may split, chip or break.

At the other extreme, hooves may wear too fast on a horse that's ridden a lot. Proper trimming and shoeing can keep feet healthy and at proper length.

The hoof wall protects the inner foot. Outer hoof horn protects sensitive living tissues inside the foot and continually grows down from the coronary band. The hoof wall is made up of tiny hollow tubes running from coronary band to ground surface. They hold moisture to keep the hoof pliable and elastic so it can compress and expand without splitting. On the inner surface of the hoof wall, these columns of tissue interface with the sensitive portion of the foot that contains blood and nerves.

The sole also has a role in protection. The sole protects the ground surface of the foot. The V-shaped frog that bisects the sole acts as a spongy cushion to help absorb concussion. The hoof wall carries most of the weight,

but the sole and frog also give support. The digital cushion, a blood-filled pad of tissue just above the frog, helps protect the coffin and navicular bones above it and dissipates concussion when the foot hits the ground.

The hoof flexes. The frog and digital cushion of a healthy foot spread a little as the foot takes weight, squeezing and forcing blood back up the leg and enhancing circulation. When the foot is lifted, these elastic tissues all

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spring back to their original shape. Regular exercise helps keep feet and legs healthy, aiding proper circulation.

Feet grow at different rates. A normal hoof wall grows about 1/4 to 3/8 inch per month. The entire hoof wall may be replaced by new hoof horn every 8 to 12 months. If the horse's feet don't wear as fast as they grow, they must be periodically trimmed to keep them from getting too long. If the horse is shod, his shoes need to be reset or replaced — after trimming the feet — every 6 to 10 weeks on average, depending on rate of hoof growth.

Get those feet on a schedule. This is why regular farrier visits are important: to keep your horse's feet within a healthy range of hoof growth. Your farrier can set up the proper trimming/shoeing schedule for your particular horse after he/she determines the rate of hoof growth.

Some horses might have feet that grow very fast, with toes that become too long (putting the feet out of balance) in just 4 to 5 weeks after being

trimmed or shod. This creates more risk for stumbling (and cracking/chipping if the horse is barefoot and not wearing its feet enough). That horse needs more frequent attention.

Other horses have slow-growing feet and can go 2 months or longer between appointments — especially if the feet are well balanced by your farrier's trim.

The farrier's job. A good farrier will keep the feet balanced and functioning properly, so the hoof will be elastic and resilient, keeping proper foot and pastern angles for optimum movement, agility and hoof health.

The farrier will clean out the foot, assess the frog and sole, trim away loose tags or excess material, then trim the hoof wall to proper length for that particular foot and the horse's needs.

If the horse will be left barefoot, enough hoof wall is left at the ground surface to take most of the weight — so the horse won't be walking on its soles and bruising them. The edge of the wall is smoothed so it won't chip or split.

If the horse will be shod, the farrier trims the hoof wall a little more, to make a smooth, level seat for the shoe. The type of shoe will depend on the work the horse will be doing, whether it's winter (needing more traction on ice and frozen ground) or summer, and the type of terrain your horse will be ridden over.

How long does it take? A good farrier, working on a cooperative horse, will usually be able to trim and shoe the horse within 40 minutes to an hour.

This may take a little longer if any special work needs to be done, or if the horse is uncooperative. The amount of time can vary a lot from farrier to farrier and from one appointment to another. **Q**