



Basic Hoof Care for Horses¹

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Hoof Care

The hoof is a vital part of the horse and a healthy hoof is essential to the well being and usefulness of the horse. Trimming is necessary to prevent sand cracks and breaking off of the hoof wall, which often results in lameness. Trimming is also required to balance the hooves so a horse moves consistently and at its best. A horse that receives regular hoof care is potentially a safer horse to ride, both to the rider and horse itself. They are less apt to slip, stumble or fall. Moreover, they are less likely to sustain injuries that would either put them out of service or require the services of a veterinarian.



Figure 1.

Horses should receive routine hoof care at intervals of 4 to 8 weeks. Factors determining whether the horse should be shod or just trimmed are: the health of the hooves, the potential or anticipated use of the horse, the defects in gait or conformation and/or the injuries or diseases plaguing the horse. Allowing the feet to accumulate an excessive growth of horn (wall) and/or continued use of the calk shoe (shoes with raised heels) may prevent the frog and elastic structures of the hoof from contacting the ground, thereby, preventing the hooves from performing their proper functions. This can result in a contraction of the whole hoof, which can lead to disease problems in the hoof.

Regardless of whether the horse is being shod or trimmed, it is important to keep in mind the feet should be trimmed in such a manner as to keep them in a condition as close as possible to that which nature intended. Trimming and selecting shoes should be consistent with the amount and class of work required of the animal, the environmental conditions and the surface upon which the horse will be used.

If the horse is to be shod, the shoes selected should be determined by the primary use of the horse. To reduce fatigue and allow the most natural way of going, the horse should be shod with the lightest shoe that will withstand the stress placed upon it. Shoes come in a variety of designs or types that effect the amount of traction or grab the horse will have. The common types of shoes are plates, rim shoes, and shoes with calks either at the toes, heels or both. Many horses used on

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turf or grass surfaces need more traction than plates can provide. Most horses used on grass or in speed events use some form of rim shoe. The most common types are the polo shoe, barrel racing shoe, race training plates and the basic rim shoe.

Hoof Care is Good Economy

Proper care of hooves is basic economy. Nothing is saved by using heavier shoes than necessary simply to get more wear out of them or by not trimming the feet as often as needed. Hoof care is even more critical in young, growing horses. This care should begin on normal foals at approximately one month of age. As long as everything progresses normally, the foal should be trimmed approximately every four weeks. The feet should be kept level and the edges of the wall rounded to prevent breaking. In the normal foal this will encourage correct bone growth in the hoof and limb. It is also important to keep flares from growing on one side of the hoof, which creates excessive stress on the bones that may lead to lameness and/or incorrect bone growth.

An old adage, "Shoeing is a necessary evil," has been prevalent throughout the horse owning public for several generations. Though this old saying has been accepted at face value for many decades, closer scrutiny will reveal the error in this line of thought. Shoeing is not always necessary; neither is it always evil. Many factors determine if, why and how a horse should be shod. Some of these factors are (1) the intended use of the horse, (2) the condition of the feet and legs, (3) the tasks to be performed, (4) the environment in which the horse is to perform, and (5) the surface upon which the horse will be working.

Another adage frequently heard is "No feet, no horse." This is as true today as when the phrase was first coined. This logic also serves to support the idea that shoeing may not be all evil.

It is not expected that all horse owners will or should shoe or trim their horse's feet, however, every horse owner should have a certain basic knowledge of hoof care and be able to evaluate the care given to their horse's hooves. To understand the principles of good hoof care, and evaluate a farrier's work requires a basic working knowledge of the hoof and its care.

Hoof Anatomy

The foot of the horse is truly a complex, very efficient and marvelous structure. It performs supporting, anti-concussion, circulatory regulating and traction functions. The hoof is a highly specialized horny-shell which covers sensitive bones, nerves, blood vessels and tissues. The visible outer covering of the hoof, viewed with the hoof resting on the ground, is called the wall. When the horse's hoof is picked up, it can be seen that the ground surface of the hoof consists of the wall, bars (an inward continuation of the outer wall), the sole (the concave area beginning just inside the wall), and the frog (a V-shaped structure in the center of the hoof).

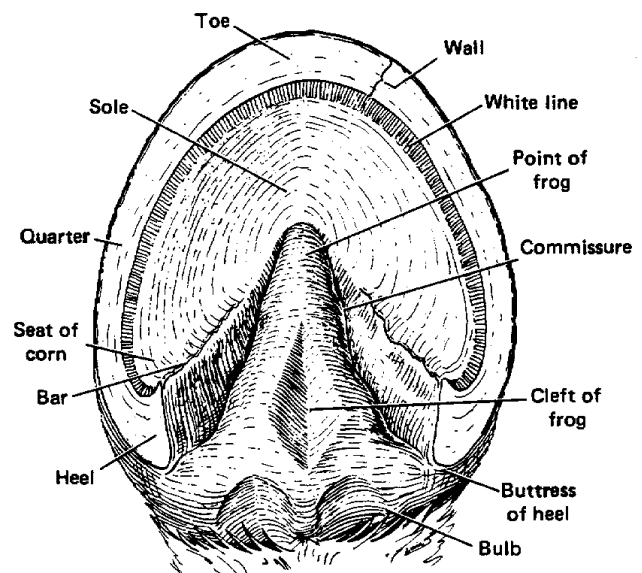


Figure 2. Anatomy of a Hoof.

Each portion of the hoof has a specific function. The wall is designed to carry the bulk of the horse's weight as well as protect the underlying structures. The bars act as a brace to control expansion and contraction of the hoof; the sole covers softer tissues, and is somewhat concave to provide traction and allow for expansion, while the frog aids in absorbing concussion, circulation, expansion and regulating moisture in the hoof. If any of these outer structures are abused by excessive trimming, injury, or infection, then normal function and soundness of the entire hoof is jeopardized.

Conclusion

Common sense, thoughtfulness and a good dialogue between the horse owner and farrier will help assure a horse is ready to perform when called upon. When selecting a farrier, the best is one in which you have confidence and is readily available when needed. A farrier should not be selected simply to emulate someone else, but rather selected on his merits. However, if you have little knowledge about the work of farriers, the best means to find a competent, reliable farrier may be to ask horsemen in your area for recommendations. Your horse must depend upon you for proper care, and as a horse owner you have the obligation to provide for the horse's needs in the best possible manner.