Hoof Care in 6 Easy Steps

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

A lot rides on your horse's hooves. Her ability to run, jump, work the farm, participate in competitions, ride trails, and interact with you and other horses all depend on the health of her hooves. But weather, environment, riding terrain, turnout frequency, horseshoes, heredity, and nutrition all affect equine hoof health. Thankfully, there are some simple ways to ease hoof care and help keep your horse sound.

the misconception about equine hooves

Too often, hoof care is treated as a time-consuming burden instead of a necessary part of a horse's daily management. Worse, there are a surprising number of horse owners who believe hoof care is the sole responsibility of their farrier. But there is more to healthy hooves than trims and shoes.

True, farriers and veterinarians are vital to the health of all domesticated horses. But hoof health is driven by a variety of factors, including nutrition, environment, wound and injury prevention and care, and cleaning. As such, sound hooves begin with the horse owner - the person best able to influence a horse's or pony's lifestyle and, thereby, the health of her hooves.

good hoof health made easy

Diligent, daily hoof care benefits much more than your horse's hooves. It clues you in to early signs of thrush and other infections and allows you to find and address puncture wounds, cracks, abscesses, and more. Plus, frequent removal of dirt, bedding, and mud is much faster - and healthier - than waiting to remove a week's worth of clods. Use the following tips to help establish a hoof care routine for your horse:

Signs of Hoof Health

How healthy are your horse's hooves? The following are general indicators of good equine hoof health:

- **a lustrous, naturally glossy hoof wall**
- **a smooth, uniform hoof wall free from cracks, rings, flares, etc.**
- **a hoof wall with a thickness of about 3/8" that tapers smoothly towards the heel**
- **a rubbery, resilient frog twice as long as it is wide without deep cracks**
- **a concave sole that only touches a shoe or pavement where it joins the wall**
- **a hoof that sheds dust, mud, and water**

1. **Clean Out Hooves** - remove dirt, rocks, grass, manure, and more with a hoof pick. Follow with a stiff-bristle brush to clean away debris from the sole, which should be visible at all times. Clean each hoof daily, especially before and after all trail rides, pasture work, or turnout. This allows you to remove any caught debris before it damages or injures the hoof. While you pick, also check for signs of thrush, puncture wounds, cracks, and abscesses.

2. **Inspect Her Shoes** - check for sprung (pulled away or bent) or shifted (moved to the side) horseshoes. Inappropriately shod hooves are susceptible to injury from the metal shoe itself or its clinches or nails. Most farriers

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

will teach you how to remove a thrown shoe - which could help save your horse's hooves and your farrier valuable time. Also keep a suitable hoof repair kit on hand for added protection.

3. **Feed For Hoof Health** - add a hoof supplement to your horse's diet. Most contain vitamins and minerals, such as biotin and zinc, respectively, to help maintain and encourage the growth of proteins and keratin that comprise your horse's hooves. In addition, ask your veterinarian to help tailor your horse's diet to meet her nutritional needs.

4. **Maintain Hoof Moisture** - control hoof water loss and absorption with a topical conditioner. Wet weather, dewy pastures, and muddy paddocks can cause hooves to soften. Similarly, dry and hot weather can cause the hoof to crack, break, contract, or grow brittle. Both situations leave hooves susceptible to injury and infection. Worse, hoof growth can take well over a year to replace a break high on the hoof wall, which is infinitely longer than the few minutes it takes to apply an appropriate sealant or moisturizer.

5. **Move Her Out of the Mud** - prolonged exposure to mud can alter hoof moisture content, cause thrush or similar infections, and loosen shoes. Worse, mud can cause a horse to slip, fall and break a leg, or injure joints. Level pastures and fill in holes to help prevent water from gathering and forming mud. Also build a run-in shelter to offer your horse protection and dry ground while she's turned out to pasture. In addition, certain topical conditioners can help control infections.

6. **Encourage Exercise** - activity helps promote hoof growth, strength, and health. Equestrian-approved games, such as Horse Soccer, can help keep your horse active and playful. If space is a concern, build a protected pasture of any size with a convenient and safe electric fence. Or, exercise your horse in the paddock with a lunge line.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*