Horse hoof care 101

Source: Bob Coleman, UK equine extension specialist

Hoof care is important to keeping your horses comfortable and healthy. Proper hoof care can help ensure that you enjoy your horse for a long time.

Farriers and veterinarians are the experts when it comes to horse hoof care. It is important for you to have a good working relationship with both. They can help you maintain a regular maintenance schedule and quickly address any hoof-related problems.

As a responsible horse owner, you should clean your horse’s feet daily. This practice gets them comfortable with having their feet handled and helps ensure they will stand for the farrier. This will make the experience safer for both the horse and the farrier. Have your horse’s hooves trim or shod as needed to protect your horse from developing hoof infections and lameness.

Horses’ hooves grow at different rates, depending on the horse and its intended purpose. For example, hooves of performance horses may grow quicker than those used for pleasure riding. Generally, hooves grow quicker during the summertime compared to the winter. In the summer, trim or shod horses every six to eight weeks. In the winter, you might be able to stretch maintenance to every six to 12 weeks, but again, it depends on the horse.

Horses should have balanced hooves. They put less strain on the horse’s bones, tendons and ligaments and allow for easier and more fluid movements. When hooves are balanced, they have the following characteristics:

* A straight line from the pastern through the front of the hoof wall.
* Toes that are not too long, square trimmed or rounded and rolled.
* The shoe reaches to the back of the hoof wall and supports the entire leg.

If you wait too long between trimmings, a horse’s hooves can crack. This can lead to serious health problems including lameness. Their hooves can also become dry and crack during dry weather, wintertime or frequent changes between dry and wet conditions. If your horse’s hooves become dry, brittle or start developing cracks, apply a hoof moisturizer to the hoof wall and sole.

Wintertime calls for specific hoof care. Horses should be left barefoot if they are not normally shod. Bare feet can help them grip surfaces and prevent slipping. However, you may need keep shoes on your horse during the winter if it is prone to bruising.

Keep areas where horses frequent clean and dry. Wet, dirty conditions can cause thrush, which is a smelly, black fluid that leaks from the hooves. It can invade the horse’s tissues and cause lameness.

Proper nutrition goes a long way to reducing hoof cracks and ensuring optimum horse health. Generally, horses need high quality hay, the appropriate amount of vitamin and mineral supplements and fresh, clean water. You can also purchase a supplement containing biotin, zinc or methionine to improve hoof health.

More information on horse health is available at the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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