



ACF Riding Club

10 Horse Hoof Care Tips



1. Pick out your horse's feet. This may sound pretty basic, but it's the single most important thing you can do for his hooves. Your horse gets a head start on healthy hooves, and you get a chance to take early action on many common hoof problems, if you pick out his feet...

- Before each ride, to remove any stones or small objects lodged in his feet before you add your weight to the situation.
- Check on the condition of his shoes.
- After you un-tack him, in case something has gotten stuck in his feet during the ride.
- When you bring him in at night, to check for objects in his feet, or for turnout injuries before turnout the next morning, to check for heat and pulse, remove manure, and check for signs of thrush.

Each time you clean your horse's hooves, take an extra couple of minutes after you've pried out any packed debris to gently clear the crevice of the frog, and scrape any remaining bits of matter off the sole, with the tip of the pick. You want to be able to see the sole's entire surface, so finish the job with a stiff brush. Some hoof picks come with brush attached, or you can buy a brush separately and inexpensively.

2. Establish what's normal.



While handling your horse's feet to pick them out, notice their temperature; when everything's OK, they'll feel very slightly warm. Take a moment to locate the digital pulse with two fingers pressed against the back of his pastern; you're interested not in the rate of the pulse, but in its strength under normal conditions. Check the frog, which has about the texture and firmness of a new rubber eraser when it's healthy. Don't be alarmed, though, if everything else looks OK but the frog appears to be peeling off--most horses shed the frog at least twice a year, sometimes more often. Your farrier's regular trimming of the frog may have prevented you from noticing this natural process before.

3. When picking out the feet, look for signs of...

Thrush. The first clue to this bacterial condition (usually caused by prolonged standing in manure, mud, or other wet, filthy conditions, or even by prolonged use of pads) is a foul smell and dark ooze from the cleft of the frog. Later, the frog becomes cheesy in texture. Although thrush can eventually cause lameness and significant hoof damage, its early stage is simple to treat. Use an over-the-counter remedy recommended by your farrier or veterinarian and follow directions carefully. Make sure your horse's stall is clean and dry. If you normally bed with straw, consider a change to much more absorbent shavings.

Puncture. If a nail or other object pierces your horse's sole and then falls out, the entry wound will probably be invisible by the time you pick his feet and you'll be unaware of it until it causes an abscess. But in some cases the object remains in place, to be discovered when you brush the last bits of dirt from the sole. **DON'T PULL IT OUT.** Put your horse in his stall. Protect the punctured foot and help the foreign object stay put with wrapping and duct tape or with a slip-on medication boot. Call your veterinarian right away. An X-ray of the foot can show how far the object has penetrated and which structures are involved. If you pick your horse's feet out regularly, you'll find the problem within a few hours of its occurrence then your veterinarian can remove the object and advise a course of treatment.

Cracks. Some cracks are superficial; others can worsen, involving sensitive hoof structures, without appropriate shoeing. One cause of a crack is a hoof abscess which breaks out through the coronet band at the top of the hoof, creating a weak spot in the hoof wall that must be attended to as it grows out. If you notice a crack in your horse's hoof, call your farrier and describe its location and size so he can decide whether it needs attention now or can wait until the next regular shoeing.

Abscess. If your horse's digital pulse feels stronger than usual and/or his foot is warmer than normal to the touch, the cause could be an abscess inside the hoof from a badly placed shoeing nail, a bruise, or an overlooked sole puncture. Your routine check can alert you to the problem and get your veterinarian or farrier involved before your horse is in even greater pain. If you find increased heat and a stronger-than-usual digital pulse in both front feet and if he's shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, call your veterinarian immediately. These are signs of laminitis, an inflammatory condition that can cause severe hoof damage and, if not treated promptly, can even be fatal.

4. Schedule regular farrier visits according to your horse's individual needs.



Although six to eight weeks is the average, there's really no standard interval for trimming and shoeing. If your farrier is correcting a problem such as under-run heels, a club foot, or flare in the hoof wall, your horse may benefit from a shorter interval. If everything looks fine but you notice that he begins forging--striking the back of a front hoof with the toe of a back hoof (you'll hear a metallic sound) ask your farrier whether a shorter schedule might avoid the problem. Possibly four to five weeks in the summer, slightly longer in the winter.

5. If your horse is shod, check his shoes each time you pick out his feet.

Risen clinches. The ends of the nails your farrier trimmed and clinched (bent flush with the outer hoof wall) at his last shoeing are now sticking out from the hoof. This is a sign the shoe is loosening, probably because it's been in place for several weeks; he can injure himself if the risen clinches on one foot brush the inside of the other leg.

A sprung or shifted shoe. When, instead of sitting flat on your horse's hoof, the shoe is pulled away and perhaps even bent, it's sprung. If it's moved to one side or the other, it's shifted. In either case, the nails in the shoe can press on sensitive hoof structures when he places weight on the foot.

6. Learn how to remove a shoe--yes, you! Many farriers are glad to teach clients how to do this. If you can remove a sprung or shifted shoe, you may save your horse unnecessary pain and hoof damage and make life easier for your farrier or veterinarian.

7. Help your horse grow the best possible hooves. Some horses naturally have better hooves than others. Your horse may already be producing the best hoof he's capable of, or the following steps may enable him to do better.

- Fine-tune his diet. Ask your veterinarian whether your feeding program is appropriate for your horse's nutritional needs.
- Add a biotin supplement to his ration (ask your vet for a recommendation). Some hooves benefit from these supplements; others show little change. Plan to use the supplement for six months to a year; that's how long it takes any benefits to show up in new hoof growth.
- Give him consistent exercise. Work on good surfaces, especially at walk and trot, increases circulation to your horse's hooves and promotes growth.

8. Avoid the "summer cycle" of alternate soaking and drying of hooves. Your horse's hooves can adapt well over time to conditions that are consistently dry or consistently damp, but hooves suffer when the environment fluctuates between wet and dry. Unfortunately, this is often the situation during the very months when you want to use him the most; late spring, summer, and early fall. Evening turnout, a summer strategy to avoid biting insects, puts hooves in prolonged contact with dew-soaked grass. They swell and soften with moisture much as your fingernails soften after hours in water. Back in a dry hot environment during the day the hooves dry and contract. With repetition of this cycle, horseshoe nails loosen as their holes through the hoof wall enlarge slightly. Such summer activities as work, stomping flies, or if your horse is restless walking the fence accelerate the loosening. Pretty soon you're asking your farrier, "Why can't my horse keep his shoes on?"

There are a couple of things you can do to minimize this pattern:

- Try to reduce by a few hours the time your horse spends standing in a dewy night time paddock or stomping flies outside during the day.
- Reduce moisture absorption by applying Tuff Stuff® to the lower two-thirds of his hooves before evening turnout. But pass up conditioners that leave the hoof feeling oily; they can actually soften hoof wall if used frequently, and if applied before your farrier's visit, they make hooves harder for him to work on.
- Shorten his summer shoeing schedule. A lost shoe often means hoof damage, which escalates the cycle of summer shoeing problems. Spacing your farrier's regular visits a week or so closer may avoid emergency calls.
- Toughen his soles with a daily application of Venice turpentine.

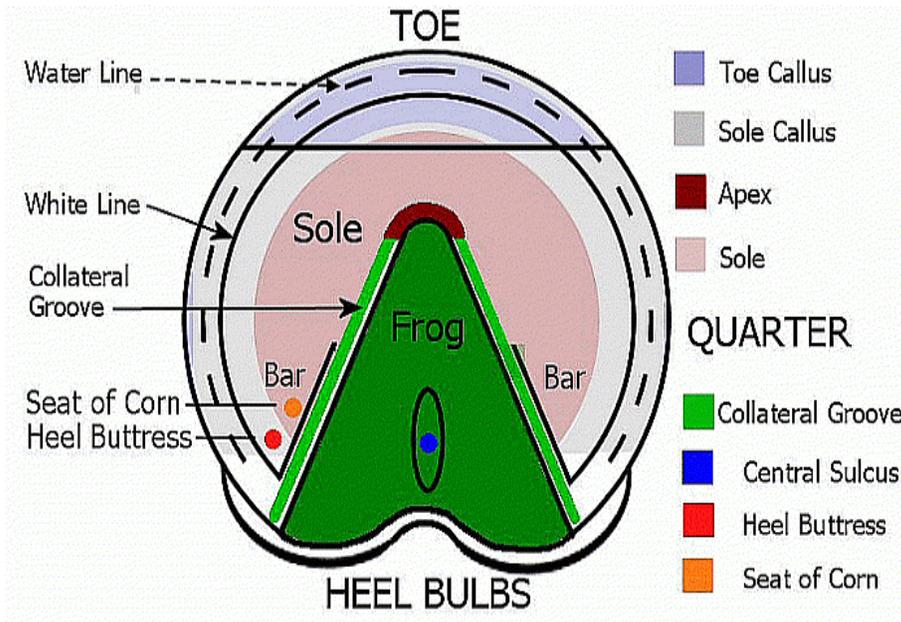
9. Try not to turn out in deep muddy footing.



Hours of standing in mud may encourage thrush or scratches (a skin infection in the fetlock area that can cause lameness). Mud is hard on shoes, too. The suction of deep mud can drag off a shoe already loosened by alternating wet and dry conditions. Mud also makes picking up his feet a harder job. If your horse is slow about getting his front feet out of the way, he may end up pulling off the heels of his front shoes because he's stepping on them with his back toes.

10. Protect your horse's hooves during hauling. Without covering for his heels, he can easily step on the edge of a shoe and pull it partially loose then spend the remainder of the journey standing on the nails of the sprung or shifted shoe. Another vulnerable area is the coronet band, the rim of tissue at the top of each hoof that generates new hoof-wall growth. Injury to this area (for instance, if he steps on himself while struggling to keep his balance in a moving trailer) can interrupt hoof growth in the area below the affected spot. The solution: either old-fashioned shipping bandages and bell boots (large enough to cover the bulbs of your horse's heels and the backs of his shoes) or good quality full-coverage Velcro-fastened shipping boots reduce the likelihood of these problems.

Source: AFA Certified Journeyman Farrier Chris Volk cares for performance horses--hunters, jumpers, dressage horses and eventers--from Olympic to local levels out of his Homeville Forge & Farrier Service, based in Washington, Va. He is a team farrier for the Canadian Equestrian Team and traveled with the team to the 2006 World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Germany, and the 2007 Pan-American Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



THE HOOF