

# HOOF ABSCESSSES

*Information sources include the following: Hoof Abscess - Health and Nutrition Tips, [www.healthandnutritiontips.com](http://www.healthandnutritiontips.com); [www.equipodiatry.com](http://www.equipodiatry.com) - American Farrier Journal ; [www.alphahorse.com](http://www.alphahorse.com)*

A hoof abscess is probably one of the most common causes of acute lameness in horses encountered by veterinarians and farriers. A horse's hoof is hard at the surface, both at the top and on the underside. The horn is made up of a hard substance called keratin, which generally protects the inner tissue of the horse's foot against bacteria and other outside agents. If bacteria are allowed to enter the inner tissues of the foot, they will begin to multiply and the horse's immune system will begin to fight bacteria, forming purulent fluid, or pus, in the process. As pus forms, what has now become an abscess enlarges and begins to put pressure on the internal tissues of the foot. Since these tissues are surrounded by the hard hoof, there is no way for the abscess to expand and travel but upwards.

## **An abscess can occur when an infection develops in the hoof due to the following:**

- The sole being pierced by a sharp object, such as a nail.
- The hoof wall cracks (generally due to improper trimming or hoof neglect, allowing a piece of gravel to enter and become lodged in the sensitive tissue above the sole.
- Damage to the corium due to decreased blood circulation from shoes, poor horse shoeing and/or trimming.
- A full thickness hoof wall crack or multiple old nail holes.

At first a hoof abscess may cause little if any pain to the horse. When the horse develops an abscess, pus collects as the body fights off the source of infection. Since the hoof cannot expand to accommodate the increasing collection of pus, the increased pressure within the hoof causes a great deal of pain. The symptoms can come on quite suddenly once swelling occurs. The horse can start the morning out walking and trotting normally, but a few hours later it may show signs of a limp, which can get worse with time. The horse will try to avoid putting weight on the affected foot, and when walking may attempt to put the weight on the toe of the hoof rather than on the sole. You may notice that the horse is laying down more than normal, to get relief from the pressure on the abscessed hoof.

If there is swelling, this will most likely be around the pastern area, just above the coronary wall that defines the top of the hoof. Pus may or may not break through the coronary wall. If the horse remains lame for more than a day, it would be wise to call the veterinarian for treatment. Even if the abscess is not serious, it is causing pain to the horse and should be treated. Without the intervention from the veterinarian, the healing process will take significantly longer.

The most important way to treat an abscess is to establish drainage. The opening should be of sufficient size to allow drainage, but not so extensive as to create further damage. Another method of treatment to encourage drainage is to apply a soak bandage. Layers of cotton are used to form a heavy bandage that encompasses the hoof. Epsom Salt is placed in the inner foot surface of the bandage that is attached to the hoof. The bandage is saturated with hot water periodically over the next 24-48 hours. Make sure you determine the status of the tetanus immunization.



The horse should show improvement within 24 hours. Following the poultice or foot soak bandage, the hoof should be kept bandaged with an appropriate antiseptic such as Betidine solution or 2% iodine, until all the drainage is stopped and the wound is dry. At this point the hoof is filled with Keratex Hoof Putty that keeps the area clean and prevents the accumulation of debris within the wound. The shoe may be replaced when the horse is sound.

Prevention can be accomplished through proper hoof care and promoting a strong, solid solewall junction (white line) that resists penetration by debris. Hoof abscesses are less likely to occur when a solid solewall junction is maintained. It is important to have your horse's hoofs trimmed in a way that accentuates a strong healthy foot and strengthens the white line. Excessive wetness or dryness may also contribute to weakness in the white line. Take steps for the prevention of each.

Although an abscess may be painful for a horse, as long as you act promptly the chances are the healing process can be expedited and resolved relatively quickly.

