

Hoof Abscess

Christoph Koch, DMV, advises what to do while waiting for the vet to arrive.

Q. If I suspect that my horse has a hoof abscess, what first-aid protocol should I follow while waiting for the veterinarian to arrive?

A. Usually, horses with hoof abscesses are severely lame, meaning lame at a walk (grade 4 out of 5 lameness). In most cases the lameness has an acute onset; therefore, the horse should be confined to a stall immediately. Describe these symptoms to your veterinarian, and arrange an exam as soon as possible.

To rule out a serious injury or even fracture (which would essentially lead to similar symptoms), you can clean the affected leg and hoof with a brush and a hoof pick or wash it with a hose. While doing so, examine the limb for any lacerations, swollen, hot or painful areas. If you are unsure, compare the questionable limb to the opposing leg. Taking a closer look at the hoof, search for wounds or draining tracts around the heel and the coronary band. Also look at the sulci of the frog and the sole to check for foreign bodies (gravel, nails, et cetera) or defects.

Your veterinarian will perform a more thorough examination (including hoof testers, comparing digital pulsation, increased warmth of the foot). The horse should not receive any anti-inflammatory drugs prior to this examination. Should the problem turn out to be a hoof abscess, opening the abscess with a hoof knife to provide adequate drainage usually takes away most of the pain. Systemic antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs are not part of a standard treatment for an “uncomplicated” hoof abscess.

Abscess first aid in review:

1. Put your horse in a stall.
2. Clean the leg and hoof of the leg your horse doesn't want to put weight on, and check for injuries.
3. Call your veterinarian and describe the situation (how lame the horse is, about the onset of the lameness, any noticeable injuries, last trimming/shoeing, et cetera).
4. Do not give your horse anti-inflammatory drugs (bute, Banamine, et cetera) or start soaking the foot before your vet has had a chance to look at it.

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