

Stall Versus Acreage

Nancy S. Loving, DVM, discusses developmental concerns when raising a young horse.

Q. What are the potential effects of raising a young horse in a stall versus letting him grow up on acreage?

A. As a precocious animal, a young horse is ready to run within hours of birth. Continual movement and limb loading provide important stimulus to develop the growing horses' musculoskeletal structures. In the initial year and a half of life, a young horse's skeletal structures lengthen and mineralize, and all soft tissues improve in strength, flexibility, elasticity and adaptability. Confining a young horse predisposes him to lameness from joint or tendon issues, can hinder hoof development and increases his risk for intestinal problems.

Significance of Turnout on Bone and Joints

A young horse readily learns to use his body in the early months and years of his life if allowed pasture turnout. His athletic antics arm him with experience and agility that he can incorporate into future athletic activities. At the same time, particularly in his first 6 months, exercise elicits adaptive responses in long bones and in joint cartilage. Studies reveal that young horses given exercise in unrestricted turnout (24/7) develop better bone density and experience far less incidence of developmental orthopedic disease (DOD) as compared to stall-confined youngsters.

Confining a young horse limits development of muscle tone and causes disuse atrophy of various musculoskeletal structures, including cartilage in his joints. Thinner joint cartilage is not as well protected from impact stress, so when the young horse does begin rigorous training, he can potentially develop inflammation that leads to arthritic changes.

Significance of Turnout on Foot Development

For a young horse to reach his athletic potential, all his physical structures must work in harmony and with as much strength and comfort as possible. A horse's feet must develop properly in his young, growing years to favorably affect his future soundness. For at least the first several years, the hoof is dependent on regular exercise and turnout to stimulate its development. Horse owners have a tendency to want to control a young horse's environment by confining him to a stall or in a small paddock for fear of injury in turnout. Ironically, this practice limits a young horse's chance for adaptation to develop a mature and substantial foot. Veterinarians and farriers remark that there is a great difference between the feet of horses raised with the ability to self-exercise in turnout compared to horses confined to small, nonstimulating environments.

It is not just turnout that is important, but also the surface on which a young horse's feet adapt. A horse that is only exposed to soft footing may not adequately stress the hoof enough to build thicker and tougher soles and a thicker bridge between collateral cartilages. Regardless of breed, poorly developed hoof structures are less able to withstand the impact of training.

Significance of Turnout on Intestinal Health

Because light physical activity stimulates gastrointestinal motility, it is best to avoid stalling a horse for long periods, regardless of age. In horses with access to turnout and exercise, fiber digestibility increases up to 20 percent. This improves retention of the fluid part of the horse's diet and promotes movement of particulate materials down the intestinal tract. More efficient digestion limits development of impaction colic. Access to free grazing in pasture also limits the risk of gastric ulcers.

Summary

The best horsekeeping strategies include providing ample turnout on acreage for your young, growing horse. You will delight in watching him play in the pasture, while his physical prowess and strength develop and his mind explores a rich environment.