

David Ramey, DVM

Exercise, Foot Care, and Laminitis

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Exercise

Regular exercise is absolutely critical for your horse. Some veterinarians maintain that fit horses rarely develop laminitis. Regular exercise is not only helpful in keeping bones, joints and muscles in good working order, but it also helps your horse keep its weight under control. Whether exercise comes in the form of daily turnout or some sort of regular structured exercise program, you need to get your horse out and moving. If you expect your horse to exercise hard, it's important to develop a conditioning program that's appropriate for the horse's work.

The *regular* part of "regular exercise" is particularly important. If you take your horse out and run it into the ground over the weekend, and don't exercise it during the week, you're going to increase the chance that it will develop laminitis. Inadequate conditioning can also be a problem when the weather is hot and humid or if the work is particularly hard. If you work your horse to exhaustion, imbalances in body fluids, salts and metabolism may occur. The muscle and gastrointestinal problems that accompany such imbalances increase the risk that the horse will develop laminitis.

You also have to mind the surface that you're riding on. Hard surfaces, such as asphalt or hard-packed dirt, can cause increased pounding on the horse's foot and result in trauma-induced laminitis ("road founder"). A lot of this would seem to be common sense - you wouldn't want someone to make you run up and down on the pavement for endless hours, would you?

If your horse develops laminitis, exercise can be harmful, particularly in the early stages. Exercising a horse with laminitis runs the risk of increasing the amount of adding further stress to damaged structures, and causing further damage to the foot. Some people may assert that exercise increases the circulation to the foot, thereby decreasing the potential for serious problems, however, there's no scientific evidence to support such an assertion. It's a good idea not to ask your horse with laminitis to do *any* exercise without input from your veterinarian.

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Foot Care

The old adage “No foot, no horse” is certainly true. You should clean and inspect your horse’s feet every day and make sure that problems that come up, such as thrush, cracks and separations are attended to. Make sure that your horse is shod or trimmed on a regular schedule, determined with the advice of your veterinarian and/or farrier. If problems arise, such as a thrown shoe, or if you horse steps on a nail, make sure that it is seen as soon as possible. Routine care of and regular attention to your horse’s feet will help prevent a lot of problems, including laminitis.

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