

Acute Lameness

Lameness is the term that refers to pain that causes the horse to limp when moving. There are many grades of lameness and when examining your horse, a vet will attempt to grade the lameness as this can help with making a diagnosis.

The lameness scale is generally from 1-5. Zero is also on the scale but that is reserved for a horse that is NOT lame. Some veterinary surgeons use a 1-10 scale but it really doesn't matter, as long as you are consistent when examining a horse with your grading.

Foot Conditions: up to 90% of all lameness involving the front legs is due to pain in the foot e.g. a foot abscess or stone bruise.

Always look at the feet first and pick the feet out properly with a hoof pick. Look for foreign objects like sharp stones or nails.

Laminitis is a serious condition that can come on very quickly. Whilst laminitis will not make a horse very lame while you are out on a ride, it is common for horses to look fine at lunch time and then suddenly struggle to walk when checked later in the evening.



Heel bulb abscess

Tendon/ligament problems:

Quite a common problem. The age of the horse can be important in determining the most likely location of the injury. Older horses often suffer from superficial digital flexor tendon tears, whereas younger, more athletic horses can injure their deep digital flexor tendons in the front legs. All ages can injure their suspensory ligaments in the hind limbs. Ultrasound of the area provides accurate diagnosis.



Fractures: thankfully fractures are rare but when they do happen they need to be diagnosed as quickly as possible and in some cases can result in the horse being euthanased. Accurate diagnosis requires x-rays of the area.

Penetrating wounds: Everyone will have seen pictures of leg wounds on horses. Vets have a saying, 'beware the small wound with a big lameness.' The biggest concern is a wound that has penetrated a joint or tendon sheath as these can be life threatening and require immediate veterinary attention.



AAEP LAMENESS SCALE

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| 0 | Lameness not perceptible under any circumstance |
| 1 | Lameness is difficult to observe and is not consistently apparent, regardless of circumstances (e.g. under saddle, circling, inclines, hard surface, etc.) |
| 2 | Lameness is difficult to observe at a walk or when trotting in a straight line but consistently apparent under certain circumstances (e.g. weight-carrying, circling, inclines, hard surface, etc.) |
| 3 | Lameness is consistently observable at a trot under all circumstances |
| 4 | Lameness is obvious at a walk |
| 5 | Lameness produces minimal weight bearing in motion and / or at rest or a complete inability to move |

Other conditions: cellulitis from an untreated wound that has caused an infection of the skin of a leg will result in a very swollen limb. Often successfully treated with antibiotics. Myopathy (tying up) can make the horse appear very sore and shuffle around, rather than stride out. Thankfully a blood test as well as palpation findings can help aid a diagnosis.

If your horse goes lame, stay calm, it's common. For grade 1-2 lameness, check for heat, swelling, and hoof issues; use a hoof pick to clear debris, look for sharp objects, cracks, or pain in joints. Call your vet if concerned.

For grade 3, follow the same steps and consider box rest while you arrange a vet visit. Grades 4-5 require immediate veterinary attention, as urgent diagnosis is needed even if it is suspected it is just a hoof abscess.