

Acute lameness in the horse

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Let's make something clear straight from the start: pain is protective. We have pain receptors all over our bodies and so does your horse. If something is damaged, pain receptors tell the body to protect the area so as to minimise further damage. That's the idea anyway.

Lameness refers to pain in a horse's leg that causes the horse to limp when moving. As you would imagine, 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 I use is from 1-5. Zero is also on the scale but that is reserved for a horse that is NOT lame so I just drop the zero.

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.

Causes of acute lameness:

1. Foot Conditions: up to 90% of all lameness involving the front legs is due to pain in

the foot like 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. A horse recently had a gallop on hard ground and suddenly pulled up 4-5 out of 5 lame and the cause? A stone bruise. 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 the owner comes up in the evening.

2. Tendon/ligament problems: also 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.

3. 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. As a general rule of thumb, the closer to the foot the injury is, the more chance vets have of treating the fracture.

4. Penetrating wounds: we have all seen pictures of horses with injured legs. They do seem to be very good at it but 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.

5. Other conditions: cellulitis from an untreated wound that has caused an infection of the skin of a leg resulting in a very swollen limb. Often successfully treated with antibiotics. Azoturia (tying up) can make the horse appear very sore and shuffle around, rather than stride out. Thankfully a blood test can quickly make a diagnosis.



Foot of a horse showing an abscess about to burst at the coronary band

your horse is. If we refer to the grading system table below, and your horse is grade 1-2 lame, look for obvious heat or swelling. Check the foot carefully using a hoof pick to remove all debris. Can you see any sharp objects or deformities involving the sole? Any hoof cracks that have tracked up to the coronary band? Flex all joints to see if you can locate an area of pain. If you're concerned call your vet for advice.

If your horse is grade 3, I would do all of the above but also think about box rest while you make an appointment with your vet.

Finally, if your horse is grade 4 or grade 5, I would call your vet immediately as although the problem is probably just a foot abscess, time may be of the essence in making a diagnosis, in case the condition is something more serious.

What should you do if your horse suddenly goes lame?

The first thing is don't panic. All horses go lame at one time or another. What you need to do depends a little on how lame

If you have any concerns about lameness with your horse, contact your vet or Central Equine Vets on 0131 664 5606

AAEP Lameness Scale

0	Lameness not perceptible under any circumstances
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



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