

Explaining Laminitis and its Prevention



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Chapter 7 - Diagnosis and First Aid Treatment

How to diagnose laminitis

Any change in normal behaviour means the animal is unwell. Owners should become familiar with feeling the strength of pulsation in the digital arteries at the fetlock joint of their animals (Fig 9). Only if you know the normal strength of this pulsation (they do vary a little between individuals) will you know when the pulsation is stronger than normal. A stronger than normal pulse indicates laminitis (or an infection or inflammation in the foot). The chance of a stronger than normal pulse in more than one foot indicating a condition other than laminitis is remote. Also, get used to feeling the normal contours of the coronary bands, only then will you be able to appreciate the depression characteristic of founder. Another useful sign in the early stages of laminitis is resentment of mild pressure on the coronary band above the toe. Most laminitis cases resent tapping or pressure applied to the sole of the foot, between the point of frog and the toe. If your horse has developed supra-coronary depressions, and is thus an acute founder or sinker case, the regular monitoring of these depressions is really useful. If the depressions are getting deeper and extending more widely around the coronary band then the horse is continuing to founder, things are no going your way. If however the supra-coronary depressions remain fairly stable, this is a good sign. The palpable changes in the depressions correlate highly significantly with the founder distances, measured by X-rays. Twice daily palpation of the depressions is recommended to help you evaluate the changes in the horse's founder condition.

Heat in the feet is a most misleading sign of laminitis and should not be used to make a diagnosis. The temperature of the feet has been shown to vary in rhythmic manner during the day in normal horses. This is because as the foot cools, a flush of blood will be sent through the foot to warm it up in a cyclic rhythm. The frequency of this flush is proportional to the environmental temperature. In laminitis, the early change is a reduction in blood supply to the laminae, at this stage the feet will be cooler than normal. Little significance should be ascribed to an apparent increase in foot temperature, unless the feet are very hot to the touch over a period of hours.

Remember that the severity of laminitis can vary tremendously. Some cases show a mild lameness, noticeable at trot, of one leg, whereas others are noticed first with the horse down, sweating and blowing like a colic or azoturia case. Laminitis, founder and sinker cases are reluctant to move. Laminitis and founder cases tend to walk on their heels, this is because their toes are relatively more painful. Sinker cases, if they can walk at all, may well walk flat footed and slap their feet down, a similar gait to a wobbler.

What to do if your animal seems to have laminitis

Firstly call a vet who routinely deals with horses. Then fit a pair or a set of TLC Frog Supports, these should be part of every horse owner's first aid kit. If the animal is at pasture, bring it into a stable, well bedded with clean Bedmax shavings. If the animal will not even walk a few steps you will have to wait for your vet to arrive before you can move it. If the horse is very lame and the stable is some distance away it will be better to travel it in a low loading trailer rather than make the horse walk. Do not let it eat any more grass in the meantime. Do not remove the horse's shoes at this stage.

When the animal has reached the stable, a decision has to be made whether to remove the shoes or not. As a general rule, I would remove the shoes from an animal with a concave sole and enough wall to keep the sole of the foot off the ground. If the sole of the foot is flat or there is insufficient wall I would leave the shoes on. The only other situation in which I would remove the shoes is if the foot is grossly overgrown and imbalanced or it has been badly shod giving little or no cover and support to the heels.