

Laminitis in Horses

Understanding Laminitis in Horses

So, let's chat about laminitis—it's a condition that causes inflammation in the sensitive tissue, called the laminae, found in your horse's hoof. When this happens, it can lead to some pretty serious issues, including permanent damage to the foot. It's estimated that one in ten horses will deal with laminitis each year, and in severe cases, it can even be fatal. The key to getting your horse back on track is to quickly identify the cause and tackle it head-on.



What Exactly Is Laminitis?

When something affects blood flow to the hoof, the sensitive laminae can start to struggle. They get deprived of the oxygen and nutrients they need, which leads to inflammation and swelling. If we don't act fast, that tissue can start to die off. When laminae take a big hit, the pedal bone can begin to rotate. This condition can strike any horse at any time of year, but it's more common in the front feet.

Recognising the Signs of Laminitis

There are three stages of laminitis that you should be aware of:

1. **Subclinical Laminitis:** This is the early stage, and it can be tricky to spot. Changes are starting to occur in the hoof, but your horse might not show visible signs of pain. One subtle indicator could be a stretched white line on the sole of the hoof.
2. **Acute Laminitis:** This stage hits suddenly and can be quite severe. Keep an eye out for signs like:
 - Reluctance or difficulty walking
 - Hesitation to get up after lying down

- Hooves that feel hot for more than a couple of hours
- Lameness that's noticeable on hard ground or when making turns
- A distinctive stance where they lean back onto their hind feet (often referred to as the "laminitic stance")
- An increased pulse in the foot
- A racing heart rate

Sometimes, horses with acute laminitis can even show symptoms that resemble colic. The sooner you recognise these signs, the better chance you have of preventing any permanent hoof damage.

3. **Chronic Laminitis:** This usually follows an acute case and is often a sign that the hoof has been damaged. You might notice:

- A cresty neck
- Persistent lameness
- Abnormal hoof growth that leads to longer toes
- Growth rings forming around the hoof wall
- A bulge in the sole due to the pedal bone's rotation



What Causes Laminitis?

There are several factors that can lead to laminitis, and some horses are more at risk than others. Overweight horses and those who have had laminitis in the past are particularly vulnerable. Here are some common triggers:

- **Inflammatory Laminitis:** Conditions linked to inflammation, like certain types of colic or severe pneumonia, can trigger laminitis.

- **Hormonal Laminitis:** There are two hormonal issues you need to watch out for:
 - **Equine Cushing's Disease:** Common in older horses, this affects the pituitary gland and can lead to excessive hair growth and abnormal fat deposits, alongside the risk of laminitis.
 - **Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS):** Horses with EMS struggle with insulin resistance, making them prone to weight gain and laminitis.
- **Carbohydrate Overload:** Too many sugars and starches can overwhelm your horse's digestive system. When undigested sugars reach the hindgut, they can produce toxins that disrupt blood flow to the feet.
- **Mechanical Problems:** Improper trimming or shoeing, fast work on hard surfaces, or even too much weight on one leg due to injury can all contribute to laminitis.
- **Stress:** Sudden changes in routine, environment, or diet, as well as overwork or travel, can stress a horse and trigger laminitis.
- **Obesity:** Carrying extra weight can put a strain on your horse's body,



more than doubling the risk of laminitis.

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How to Treat Laminitis

If you suspect your horse might have laminitis, it's crucial to call your vet right away. Until then, keep your horse calm and limit their movement. If they usually stay in a stable, make sure they have a deep, clean bed of shavings for comfort. If they're out in a pen, provide the same soft bedding.

Note: To help reduce stress during this time, keeping a familiar buddy nearby can be a great comfort.

Your vet will likely recommend a treatment plan that may include:

- Pain relief medication
- Extended rest on a deep bed of shavings
- Proper hoof trimming and shoeing
- Dietary adjustments

In some cases, your vet might need to take X-rays to see how much the pedal bone has rotated. Unfortunately, if the bone has dropped too low, euthanasia may be the only option to prevent further suffering.

Can Laminitis Be Cured?



With quick diagnosis and diligent management, many horses can recover from laminitis, though some hoof damage might be irreversible. Prevention is always the best route, so here are some tips to keep laminitis at bay.

Preventing Laminitis

1. **Diet:** A balanced, low-calorie diet is key. Feed your horse little and often to mimic their natural grazing habits. Limit grass intake during spring and summer when sugar levels are high. Muzzles can help horses prone to laminitis.
2. **Weight Management:** Regularly weigh your horse to catch any weight issues early. Use body scoring to spot unusual fat deposits and to help create a weight loss plan if needed.
3. **Foot Care:** Check your horse's feet daily for heat or an increased pulse. Feeling for the digital pulse is simple: place your fingers on the fetlock joint, gently press, and feel for the pulse. Most horses should have a faint pulse.

4. **Trimming and Shoeing:** Keep up with regular hoof care. Neglecting hoof maintenance for over eight weeks can raise the risk of laminitis.

5. **Surface Monitoring:** Be mindful of the ground when working your horse. Hard surfaces like roads can damage their feet, so stick to gentle walking if you encounter tough terrain.

By staying alert and attentive to your horse's needs, you can help keep laminitis at bay and ensure they remain healthy and happy!