Diagnosing and Treating Equine Lameness

Has your horse got a limp? Determine what’s wrong and then help him heal.
Here at MyHorse Daily we are committed to bringing you the latest information designed to keep you and your horse healthy, happy and productive.

Enjoy the read!

Amy Herdy, Managing Editor
MyHorse Daily
Soon or later, every horse owner is confronted with an animal that’s either slightly “off” or one that’s downright gimpy. What you do next will help determine the outcome of this situation.

**If You Suspect Your Horse is Lame**

*What you’re looking for:*

- **Head-bob:** Your horse’s head bobs UP when a sore forelimb hits the ground. His head bobs DOWN when a sore hind limb hits the ground. (Tip: A head-bob is easiest to see when your horse is trotted toward you. As a general rule, the more pronounced the bob, the more severe the pain.)

- **Hip-hike or hip-drop:** The hip on one side rises HIGHER and/or sinks LOWER than the other side. (Tip: This is easiest to see when your horse is trotted away from you. Make it more visible by sticking a piece of white adhesive tape on each hip to give your eye a reference point.)

- **Toe-drag:** The toe of the affected hind limb drags the ground on the forward swing.

- **Shortened stride:** The stride on one leg is shorter than the stride on the other legs.

*Now, locate the lame leg:*

Follow these steps. Call your veterinarian if you observe any sign of injury or lameness in steps 1, 2 or 3. If you still can’t ferret out the lameness, ask your vet for help.

**Step 1:** Examine your horse’s legs and feet for external evidence of injury.

- Stand him squarely on solid, level ground; then visually examine each leg and coronary band for bumps, swellings, wounds, discharges or other such problems.
- Feel each hoof for excess heat; then check the strength of your horse’s digital pulse (using the thumb and middle fingers of your right hand, feel behind and on either side of his lower fetlock—above the sesamoid area—with your palm on the front and fingers wrapped toward the back until you feel a faint pulse).
- Pick up, clean and examine each foot for nails, cracks, bruises or other abnormalities. Note any resistance, which could indicate pain in another foot (hence his reluctance to increase the load there).

**Step 2:** Watch your horse trot a straight line. Lameness that’s barely perceptible at the walk can become more evident at the trot.

- Find a flat, smooth surface with solid footing.
- Recruit a helper. Give her a crop or whip, if necessary, to help get your horse trotting in-hand.
- Have your helper trot the horse on a straight line away from you for about 50 feet, loosely holding the lead so as not to inhibit a head-bob. Then have the pair trot toward you, then past you, so you can view the horse from the front and side.

Repeat the exercise two to three times. If you still can’t identify the lame leg(s), one of three things could be happening:

1. Your horse may be too lame, too fresh or too uncomfortable to cooperate.
2. The lameness is bilateral or too subtle to show up on a straight line.
3. There is no lameness.

**Step 3:** Longe your horse. Have your helper longe the horse in both directions, gradually tightening the circle. Or have your helper trot him in circles in-hand.

As a general rule, the tighter the circle, the more pronounced the lameness. Still can’t see the problem’s origin? Call your vet.

---

Successful treatment of equine lameness begins with an accurate diagnosis and follows through with informed treatment. Here are some tips.

Adapted from articles by Dr. Karen Hayes, Sue Copeland and Karen Kopp Du Teil
Considerations for Recovery

Most of the lamenesses from which horses suffer have a typical course of action that governs the days, weeks or months that will be necessary for healing. But other factors influence the prognosis of an injury and the rate of your horse’s recovery. His conformation, use and temperament are prime determinants. So are the location and severity of the injury, as well as certain biological limitations inherent in the body’s repair process. Equally important is the quality of care your limping equine companion receives.

Of course, the better informed you are about the nature of his problem, the more effective any therapy or treatment regimen is likely to be. Whatever the source of your horse’s specific unsoundness, consider these factors and how they will affect healing:

- **The exact location of the injury.** The prognosis is less favorable if the problem involves support rather than peripheral tissue, bone instead of soft tissue, or if it’s in a joint rather than on a “straightaway.”

- **The anatomy of the horse’s limb, as well as his overall conformation.** Flaws in an individual’s skeletal design further stress a weak link, especially if they contributed to the original injury.

- **The extent and severity of the actual damage.** A broken cannon bone, for instance, may be no more than a scarcely detectable crack, or the bone may be shattered beyond repair.

- **Complications.** Infection,
How Lame is Your Horse?

There are many different methods of defining and grading lameness. We’ve adapted the classification of the American Association of Equine Practitioners, as defined in its Guide to Horse Shows.

Definition:
Lameness is a variation from the normal gait or posture due to pain or mechanical dysfunction.

Classification:

Grade 1—Difficult to observe; not consistently apparent, regardless of circumstances (i.e., weight carrying, circling, inclines, hard surfaces, etc.)

Grade 2—Difficult to observe at a walk or trotting a straight line; consistently apparent under certain circumstances (i.e., weight carrying, circling, inclines, hard surfaces, etc.)

Grade 3—Consistently observable at a trot under all circumstances

Grade 4—Obvious lameness; marked nodding, hitching or shortened stride

Grade 5—Minimal weight bearing in motion and/or at rest; inability to move

Minimal weight-bearing on a limb may indicate a Grade 5 lameness, according to the AAEP classification.
sequestration (in which a piece of bone or other tissue breaks off and is treated like a foreign object by the body), advanced age or debilitating illness can cloud the potential outcome of an injury.

**Inflammatory stage.** From three to five days after injury, your horse will benefit—and suffer—from his body’s attempts to mend his injury. This essential inflammation activates local pain receptors, increases the permeability of the blood vessel walls and sends immune chemicals and cells to the site via a rush of fluid that causes the area to swell. New cells multiply and repair the damage. The challenge is to mediate the reaction so that it does not become self-destructive.

**Actual course of the injury.** An acute problem heals relatively quickly with rest and proper rehabilitative therapy. A subacute or chronic injury, in which lameness comes on gradually and tends to recur, has a more questionable outcome unless the underlying cause is detected and treated. Degenerative conditions, which progressively worsen regardless of treatment, have the poorest prognosis.

Below: Palpating a tendon can help pinpoint the problem area.
While You Wait

1. **Confine your horse.** Movement might make things worse. Until proven otherwise, confine him to a box stall or small paddock and provide a companion, if necessary, to discourage fretful movement.

2. **Cool the foot, tendon or joint suspected of being the problem.** Select a flexible ice pack large enough to wrap around the entire hoof wall (this might take two packs). Apply the pack(s) and secure with a wrap. Leave on for five minutes. Repeat every half hour or until the vet arrives, whichever comes first.

3. **Avoid feeding him.** Give no feed—only water—until your vet arrives and can confirm or dismiss laminitis as the cause of lameness.

4. **Apply a support wrap.** If you’re reasonably sure where the problem is, apply a support wrap appropriate to the area being bandaged, adding an extra layer of padding and being especially careful to apply the elastic layer evenly and firmly enough to prevent slippage.
Credits

Diagnosing and Treating Lameness

This report is brought to you by the editors of EquiSearch.com, EQUUS magazine, Horse&Rider magazine and Hands-on Senior Horse Care: the Complete Book of Senior Equine Management and First Aid by Dr. Karen Hayes and Sue Copeland.

• Visit MyHorseDaily.com for daily articles on all things horses.

• Subscribe to MyHorse Daily and weekly e-newsletters, free how-to videos, tips and much more.

• Peruse hundreds of horse books and DVDs at our store, HorseBooksEtc.com.