

Hoof Care and Ranch Horses

The nature of the ranch horse's work increases the risk of lameness.

By Dr. Ed Johnson

It is not a requirement that ranch horses be shod, however, proper routine hoof care will help to ensure healthy feet as well as aid in the prevention of lameness. And, proper care of the hooves can certainly help reduce the incidence of soft tissue injuries. The primary functional reasons for shoeing any horse are to protect the feet, provide traction, and alter the gaits. Recommended intervals for care can vary, but average five to six weeks. The interval should not extend beyond eight weeks.

Risky Business

Because of the environment many ranch horses live and/or work in, they are prone to both the common foot diseases that many horses are susceptible too, as well as some that are less frequently seen in the pleasure horse population. The nature of their activity puts them on terrain that may cause soft tissue damage because of sprains, strains, tears, lacerations, and punctures.

Frequently ranch horses are exposed to wet or swampy environmental conditions that can precipitate diseases caused by organisms harbored in water or moist environments. Moisture helps propagate such diseases as thrush, canker, and pithiosis. Also a condition commonly known as "scratches" or "grease heels" is exacerbated by moisture, as is dermatitis of the lower legs. Both of these conditions can be very aggravating to treat and can cause mild lameness. Additionally, too much moisture in the foot can cause the hoof to be too soft, resulting in cracks and abscesses.

Photo by Cookie Originals

While shoeing is not always necessary, routine proper hoof care must be given to maximize the usefulness, productivity and longevity of the ranch horse. Photo by Cookie Originals.

Thrush

Thrush is a condition affecting the frog portion of the foot whereby anaerobic organisms are trapped along the collateral and/or central sulci of the frog. Degeneration can occur in any part or all of the frog tissue. This disease can vary in severity from being a nuisance disease to causing lameness. Thrush is relatively easy to treat in the milder stages, but can be very difficult to control in the more advanced stages. In severe cases involving the central sulcus, treatment can be extensive and the

damage irreversible, which creates a situation where the horse is much more prone to thrush due to the resulting conformation of the posterior portion of the foot.

Canker & Pithiosis

Two diseases that seem to be related to wet and/or filthy environments are canker and pithiosis (also known as phycomycosis, swamp cancer, leeches, and kunkers). Both of these diseases are granulomatous entities that are very difficult to control and treat. Surgery is almost always required in the treatment process and in many instances, multiple surgeries will be necessary. Many to most horses will not survive pithiosis of the foot or at least not be sound if they do survive. Pithiosis can affect nearly any part of the body.

Canker is a chronic hypertrophy of the horn producing tissues of the foot including the frog, sole, and, at times, the wall. Canker can be cured, but is very time consuming and frequently requires surgery. Canker is commonly associated with draft horses, but can occur in any breed. Frequently, canker is seen in cases where a horse injures its frog and is living in moist or filthy conditions.

Disease & Injury

Ranch horses are more apt to suffer from conditions such as quitter, sidebone, ringbone, keratomas, caudal heel syndrome, abscesses and injuries including bruised soles, puncture wounds and wounds to the coronet band. Additionally, soft tissue injuries are commonplace in ranch horses. The reasons for these injuries include horses being used too intensely while being physically unfit, the lack of or improper hoof care resulting in excess strain on ligaments, tendons, suspensories and hoof structures and working on terrain that doesn't provide the best traction can certainly lead to problems. Selecting shoes that help increase traction is beneficial to the horse and may reduce the number of days a horse must be laid up.

Photo by Cookie Originals

Wet or swampy environmental conditions that ranch horses are exposed too, predispose them to diseases caused by organisms harbored in water or moist environments.

Photos by Cookie Originals.

In conclusion, to maximize the usefulness, productivity and longevity of the ranch horse, proper and routine hoof care must be given. Additionally, keeping a close eye on the horse's legs and keeping them physically fit will aid in the prevention of injuries and pay big dividends in the long run.

