

EQUINE LAMENESS

Stress, strain or injury can take a toll on any horse, even one with no obvious conformation defects. When lameness occurs, you should contact your veterinarian promptly. A prompt examination can save you time, money and frustration by diagnosing and treating the problem immediately, possibly preventing further damage. The goal of such early examinations is to keep small problems from becoming big ones. Lameness evaluations are also routine in most purchase examinations. When your veterinarian evaluates an animal you are considering for purchase, you may be forewarned about potential problems and should be able to make a more informed decision.

LAMENESS DEFINED

Traditionally, lameness has been defined as any alteration of the horse's gait. In addition, lameness can be manifest in such ways as a change in attitude or performance. These abnormalities can be caused by pain in the neck, withers, shoulders, back, loin, hips, legs or feet. Identifying the source of the problem is essential to proper treatment.

EXAMINATION PROCEDURES

Veterinarians have specific systems for performing examinations, depending on the reasons for the evaluation. However, essential features of a thorough examination include the following:

- **The medical history of the horse.**

The veterinarian asks the owner questions relating to past and present difficulties of the horse. He or she also inquires about exercise or work requirements and any other pertinent information.

- **A visual appraisal of the horse at rest.**

The veterinarian will study conformation, balance and weight bearing, and look for any evidence of injury or stress.

- **A thorough hands-on exam.**

The veterinarian palpates the horse, checking muscles, joints, bones and tendons for evidence of pain, heat, swelling or any other physical abnormalities.

- **Application of hoof testers to the feet.**

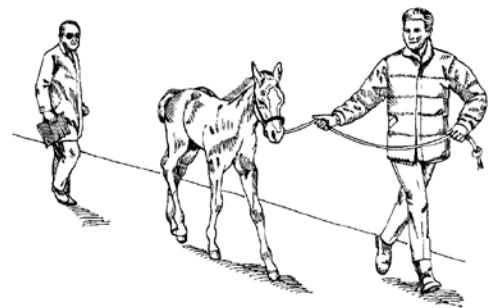
This instrument allows the veterinarian to apply pressure to the soles of the feet to check for undue sensitivity or pain. Many practitioners will concentrate on the front feet, as 60–65% of the horse's weight will be supported by the front limbs.

- **Evaluation of the horse in motion.**

The veterinarian watches the horse walking and trotting. Gait evaluation on different ground surfaces (soft to hard) may give valuable information as to the nature of a particular lameness. Observing the horse from the front, back and both side views, the veterinarian notes any deviations in gait (such as winging or paddling), failure to land squarely on all four feet and the unnatural shifting of weight from one limb to another. The horse also walks and trots in circles, on a long line, in a round pen and under saddle. The veterinarian looks for certain signs, such as shortening of the stride, irregular foot placement, head bobbing, stiffness, weight shifting, etc.

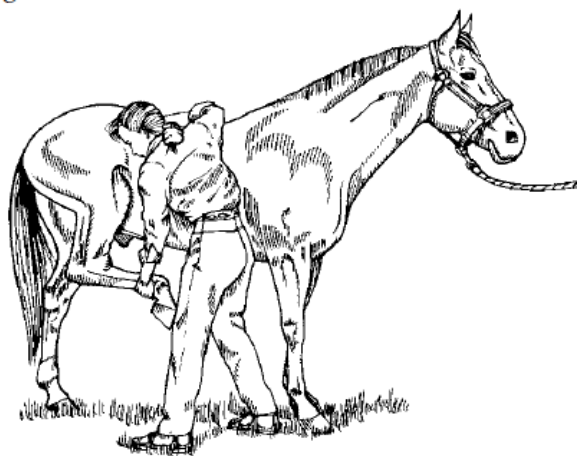
- **Joint flexion tests.**

The veterinarian holds the horse's limbs in a flexed position and then releases the leg. As the horse trots away, the veterinarian watches for signs of pain, weight shifting or irregular movement. Flexing the joints in this manner may reveal problems that are not otherwise readily apparent.



DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

Diagnostic procedures are often necessary to isolate the specific location and cause of lameness. *Lameness is best treated with a specific diagnosis.* If your veterinarian has cause for concern based on initial examination, he or she may recommend further tests, including diagnostic nerve or joint blocks, radiographs, and ultrasound.



• Diagnostic nerve and joint blocks

These analgesic techniques are perhaps the most important tools used to identify the location of lameness. Working systematically, the veterinarian temporarily deadens sensation to specific segments of the limb, one joint at a time, until the lameness disappears. This procedure isolates the area of pain causing the lameness. Blocks can also help determine whether the condition is treatable.

• Radiographs

These are useful in identifying damage or changes to bony tissues. They should be interpreted only by an experienced and knowledgeable veterinarian, since not all changes are cause for concern. Radiographs provide limited information about soft tissue, such as tendons, ligaments or structures inside the joints, which are often the source of lameness.

• Ultrasound

This procedure uses ultrasonic waves to image internal soft tissue structures such as tendons and ligaments.

TREATMENT

Once a diagnosis has been made, your veterinarian can then prepare a treatment plan for your horse. Some lameness conditions have irreversible consequences and will require life-long management (ie severe laminitis and osteoarthritis) while other conditions may be treated medically or surgically with additional laser therapy, corrective shoeing, and rest.

GOOD STEWARDSHIP

Lameness is a complicated condition, with many possible causes. Be a conscientious observer. If you suspect a problem, discontinue riding your horse and seek advice from your veterinarian promptly. By identifying even minor lameness and acting swiftly to correct it, you will minimize the risk of injury to the horse and yourself, and you will be rewarded by better performance and a longer, more useful life from your horse.

