



Laminitis is a common but often poorly understood disease. It is usual for owners to believe it only occurs in spring in small ponies. This is not always the case and it is important you understand the consequences of an episode of laminitis.

What is laminitis?

Laminitis (also known as 'founder') is a very painful condition of the foot. It results from the disruption of normal blood flow to the foot, causing swelling (inflammation) which may lead to weakening of the structures in the hoof. In severe cases, the pedal (coffin) bone in the foot can rotate or sink downwards and may eventually come through the sole and be exposed.

Laminitis can occur in two forms: acute and chronic. In acute cases, symptoms appear quickly and are severe; in chronic cases, the symptoms appear gradually over time and are usually relapses from previous acute episodes.

How do I recognise laminitis?

Symptoms of acute laminitis include:

- Reluctance to move and lameness (often in more than one limb), particularly seen when the horse is turning in circles or walking on hard surfaces.
- Abnormal gait - 'heel before toe'.
- Characteristic stance - weight is shifted to the hindlimbs with the forelimbs stretched out in front.
- Hot feet with a 'thumping' pulse in the pastern.
- Pain just in front of the point of the frog when pressure is applied.

How do I recognise laminitis?

Symptoms of chronic laminitis include:

- Rings in the hoof wall which are wider at the heel than at the toe.
- Bruising of the soles.
- Widening white line ('seedy toe'), possibly with abscesses.
- Dropped soles or flat feet.
- 'Aladdin slipper' hoof due to faster growth at the heels than at the toe.
- Laminitic ponies on lush grass often have a large neck crest which feels firmer in the early stages of the disease.

What should I do if my horse has these symptoms?

If your horse has signs of acute laminitis, call your vet - laminitis is a medical emergency. Your horse has a much better chance of recovery if treatment is started early.

Before the vet arrives you can make your horse more comfortable by:

- Removing it from the field, if outside.
- Stabling it on deep bedding (shavings, paper or sand).
- Removing food (but do not remove water).
- Encouraging it to lie down to take pressure off the feet.

Chronic laminitis is not treated as an emergency but it is still very important that you contact your vet promptly for advice.

But I thought only fat ponies got laminitis?

Any horse can be affected by laminitis, but some horses are more prone to the condition than others.

Factors which make a horse more at risk of developing laminitis are:

- Breed - ponies and heavy breeds, such as draft horses, are more susceptible.
- Obesity.
- Diet containing high carbohydrate content, eg grain.
- Abrupt changes in diet or overeating, especially consumption of excessive amounts of fresh grass or grain ('grain overload'), particularly in spring.
- Severe colic.

Laminitis - the facts



- Recent heavy exercise on hard surfaces.
- Severe infection or illness causing high temperatures, eg pneumonia or retained placenta after foaling.
- Excessive weight bearing on one leg because of injury to another leg.

What will my vet do?

Your vet will need to confirm that your horse has laminitis and this may involve:

- Asking about the recent health, diet and exercise of your horse.
- Examining your horse's feet and applying hoof testers to the frog.
- Taking x-rays (radiographs) of your horse's feet to look at the position of the pedal bone.

Treatment for your horse will depend on the severity of the symptoms and may include:

- Treatment of the primary condition, eg pneumonia, retained placenta, etc.
- Fluids if your horse is dehydrated.
- Drugs to reduce swelling and pain (anti-inflammatories), to fight infection (antibiotics), and to improve blood flow to the feet (anticoagulants and vasodilators).
- If your horse has overeaten, liquid paraffin may be administered by stomach tube to speed up the passage of feed through the gut. Activated charcoal can be given to absorb toxins if poisons have been ingested.
- Dietary change.
- Draining of foot abscesses.
- Follow up x-rays to check on progress.
- Therapeutic farriery, eg corrective trimming, frog supports and therapeutic shoes or pads. Your vet will liaise with your farrier on the best option for your horse. Frog pads can be applied by your vet if the farrier is not readily available.

It is important to follow your vet's instructions carefully, and keep him/her informed on the progress of your horse.

Unfortunately, extensive, irreversible damage to the hooves can occur in very severe cases, for example when treatment has not been started promptly. In these instances, the horse will never be free of pain and the only option is euthanasia.

Will I be able to ride my horse again?

Most horses that have been treated for laminitis can be ridden again. However, this depends on how severe the symptoms are and how well your horse responds to treatment. You should not attempt to ride your horse until your vet has said that this is safe. Also, once a horse has had laminitis it is much more prone to further episodes and so it is essential to watch it closely for signs of laminitis and to stop riding if any signs occur.

What can I do to prevent my horse suffering from laminitis again?

To prevent relapses of laminitis, it is important to make permanent changes to the daily management of your horse. Although you may need your vet's advice for some of these changes, there are easy steps you can take yourself such as:

- Using electric fencing to divide pasture and restrict access to grass, especially during spring.
- Turning your horse out onto sand if no other turnout is available.
- Preventing access to frosted paddocks.
- Restricting exercise on hard surfaces.
- Riding your horse daily.

Your vet can advise you on other important preventative measures which include:

- A diet that provides adequate nutrition without excess carbohydrate.
- Weight loss if your horse is overweight: use a weigh tape for accuracy.
- Routine foot care, including regular hoof trimming.
- Improving parasite control and vaccination protection to keep your horse in good health.
- Nutritional supplements to promote healthy hooves.



If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.