



Lameness is the most common reason for horses needing veterinary attention. Athletic horses place huge stresses on their limbs and injury is common. Although complete prevention is not possible some good management will reduce the risk of horses developing lameness problems.

What is lameness?

A horse suffering from lameness is incapable of normal locomotion, ie its normal gait is impaired.

What causes lameness?

Lameness is due to pain within the limb. The most common causes of lameness occur within the foot, and lower limb problems are more common than upper limb problems.

How do I recognise lameness?

Lameness is most easily observed in trot. Generally lameness is only observed in walk in severe cases. Although lameness will affect the canter it is much more difficult to assess at this gait.

Forelimb lameness is most easily recognised in trot by a head nod or forequarter dropping on the non-lame leg. Hindlimb lameness is more difficult to recognise, it is easiest to observe elevation of the hindquarters on the lame limb.

Swelling and pain may be obvious in some cases but in many cases no swelling is observed. Joints may be swollen and not be the cause of pain so further investigation will be required.

What should I do if my horse has these symptoms?

Lameness investigation is extremely challenging and time consuming. If you suspect your horse is lame you should make an appointment to have the lameness investigated by your vet. This is often best performed at an equine hospital to allow a full examination and investigation with appropriate equipment.

What will my vet do?

Your vet will perform a comprehensive lameness examination. Your horse will be examined at rest, then trotting in a straight line, and in many cases lunging on soft and hard surfaces. If your horse is only lame when ridden then it will need to be ridden during the examination. Flexion tests (a joint is held flexed for a minute and the horse then trotted off) are used to help localise pain. Nerve blocks are then used to localise the lameness or confirm that a swelling is significant. This can be very time consuming as each block takes at least 30 minutes to fully assess before progressing to the next block. Once lameness is localised, radiographs are taken to determine the severity and assist with determining a cause, but further imaging may be required. Ultrasound is used to assess soft tissues and scintigraphy may be needed to assess bone if radiographs are not productive. MRI is available at some specialist clinics and gives very detailed images of soft tissue and bone.

What can I do to prevent lameness?

Prevention of lameness problems is extremely difficult. Athletic horses place huge stresses on their limbs so it is not surprising that injuries occur. However there are some practices that will minimise the risk of lameness developing:

- When purchasing a horse request a pre-purchase examination performed by your vet.
- Regular foot care to maintain good foot balance. Poor foot balance will place abnormal forces on lower limb joints.
- When preparing your horse for high-level work increase work level gradually. Horses need to be conditioned to the level of work and the surface type on which they are to compete.
- Avoid working on hard surfaces if possible.
- Cold therapy (cold hosing or icing) of limbs after hard work will help reduce inflammation.
- If swelling or pain develops rest your horse and seek veterinary advice. Particular attention should be given to tendons as swelling and heat develops long before lameness is observed.
- Bandaging horses during work may reduce direct trauma to the limbs but is unlikely to prevent overload injuries, and poorly applied can result in pressure injuries.



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.