

MANAGING EQUINE HOOF HEALTH IN WET CONDITIONS

The Educated Horseman: Health Series



Louisiana's high humidity and frequent rainfall can pose significant challenges to maintaining hoof health. Prolonged exposure to moisture can lead to a variety of hoof complications that, if not managed properly, can compromise the horse's comfort, soundness and performance.

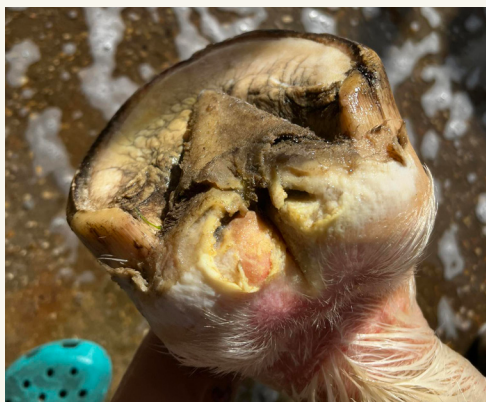
Common Hoof Complications in Wet Conditions



X-ray of white line disease.
Photo credit: Courtney Cronan.

Hoof abscesses are the most common lameness condition seen in horses and occur when bacteria become trapped inside the hoof as a result of small cracks or punctures in the softened hoof wall or sole. The horse's natural protective barriers are weakened by prolonged exposure to muddy conditions. Abscesses can cause sudden, severe lameness. Your horse may be reluctant to bear weight on the affected limb and in some circumstances have a strong digital pulse. Your farrier or veterinarian can begin treatment by opening the abscess, preferably through the sole of the hoof, allowing it to drain, followed by soaking or packing the hoof in Epsom salt baths to draw out the infection. Once the abscess has drained, the hoof should be kept clean and dry with a protective bandage applied to prevent reinfection. Your veterinarian may recommend NSAIDs to reduce pain and inflammation.

White line disease, also known as seedy toe, occurs when bacteria or fungi invade the inner hoof wall, causing the separation of the hoof wall from the sole. The main symptom is a powdery, crumbly material at the white line when cleaning the hoof. In advanced cases, the hoof wall may become detached leading to structural weakness and lameness. Treatment involves removing the infected portion of the white line, applying antifungal or antibacterial solutions, or in some extreme cases, resecting a portion of the hoof wall to remove all of the infected tissue. Regular hoof trimming can help reduce the chance of white line disease by reducing cracks and splits in overgrown hooves.



Thrush. Photo credit: Rachel Grace.

Thrush is a bacterial infection that affects the frog of the hoof, typically thriving in wet, muddy environments. The bacteria responsible for thrush, *Fusobacterium necrophorum*, break down the tissue in the frog, leading to a distinct-smelling black discharge and tenderness in the frog area. In severe cases, thrush can cause complete sloughing of the frog leading to significant pain and lameness. To manage thrush, it is important to keep the horse's hooves clean and dry. Regular cleaning and the application of commercial thrush treatments or diluted iodine solutions can help control the infection.

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Management Techniques for Hoof Care in Wet Conditions

- **Regular hoof cleaning and inspection:** Removing mud, manure and other debris from the hooves helps prevent bacterial and fungal infections. Inspect the hooves for any signs of damage, infection or abnormalities. Hoof sealants may also be applied to help repel moisture and strengthen the hoof wall.
- **Farrier care:** Regular trimming is important in maintaining hoof balance and preventing problems like cracks, chips and flares. In wet conditions, more frequent trimming may be necessary to keep the hooves in optimal condition.
- **Provide dry turnout areas:** Limiting the horse's exposure to excessively wet and muddy environments is key to preventing hoof problems. If possible, provide dry turnout areas with good drainage. Rotating pastures can reduce prolonged exposure to wet conditions and reduction of soil compaction.
- **Proper stall management:** Stalls should be kept clean and dry to prevent moisture from building up. Use absorbent bedding materials and remove wet materials regularly. Rubber stall mats can also help keep hooves dry by providing a barrier between the hoof and the ground.
- **Dietary considerations:** Providing additional dietary support may increase overall hoof health. Adding nutrients like biotin, zinc and methionine can support healthy hoof growth.
- **Hoof protection:** In some cases, protective footwear, such as hoof boots, can be used during turnout or riding to shield the hooves from excessive moisture and mud.

Hoof care in Louisiana's wet and humid climate requires diligent management to prevent and treat common hoof complications such as abscesses, white line disease and thrush. Regular cleaning, proper farrier care, and maintaining dry environments are helpful strategies to maintain your horse's hoof health. While it is impossible to prevent all hoof issues, taking proactive measures to manage the effects of wet conditions can reduce the occurrence of common hoof problems and keep your horse comfortable and sound.

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