

Barefoot vs. Horseshoes: What Is Right for Your Horse?

By Jen Reid

There are lots of changes taking place in the horse world today. One frequent topic of discussion is whether horses should be left barefoot, as they are in the wild, or whether they should wear horseshoes, as domesticated horses have for hundreds of years. As with most questions, the answer is a resounding “It depends on the situation.”



In the wild, horses can easily travel an average of 20 miles a day searching for food and water. Their hooves wear down according to the environment in which they live. In very rough and rocky conditions, they are very short and tough. Sandy or soft conditions allow the hooves to grow a bit longer. Regardless of the environment, horses’ feet adjust accordingly. When a horse is removed from a natural environment, however, we need to step in to help. When deciding whether to put shoes on your horse or leave her barefoot, ask yourself a few simple questions.

What is expected of my horse?

A pasture pal who has retired from riding and spends her days leisurely wandering around a pasture doesn’t have a great need for shoes. Her feet will need to be trimmed and have routine maintenance, but that’s about all. If she is still a working gal, then the type of work she does and the environment in which she does it need to be taken into consideration.

What type of environment does my horse live in?

Is she in a stall with only a small turnout, or does she live in a soft, sandy paddock, a hard-packed clay pasture, an irrigated grass pasture, or a 300-acre pasture with rough, rocky terrain? Where your horse lives affects your horse’s feet. The drier and more abrasive the footing, the tougher her feet will be. Also, the more area in which she has to move around, the better the condition of her feet will be.

Where do I need my horse to go outside of her living area?

If you generally hop on her and saunter out the back gate for a trail ride in footing just like what she lives in, your horse is just fine without shoes. But, if you keep her in an irrigated pasture where her feet are kept wet and soft, but you want to ride in rough,

rocky hills, your horse needs shoes to be comfortable. If she's not shod under those conditions, it's comparable to asking a person who is normally accustomed to wearing shoes to go for a hike barefoot over gravel. Not a fun prospect!

Does my horse have any problems with her feet?

While barefoot is always the preferred choice, there are times when feet that are in trouble (from conditions like founder and navicular syndrome) can be greatly helped by corrective shoeing. If your horse is having trouble walking around just in the area where she lives, corrective shoeing may be required.

If your horse is comfortable barefoot wherever you're riding, barefoot is hands-down the best, healthiest option. That isn't always realistic, however, and in such cases properly applied horseshoes are the answer. A third option that is gaining in popularity is the use of boots. They slide on and provide protection when needed, but then can be taken off when you're finished riding.

Whatever you do, always keep in mind what you're asking of your horse and help her be able to do what you ask in as comfortable a way as possible. Be considerate and fair in your requests and she will respond accordingly.

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