

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, their hooves 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, and often that's all that is required to keep her feet happy and healthy. 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 your horse in a stall with only a small turnout, or does he 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 his feet will be. Also, the more area in which he has to move around, the better the condition of his feet will be.

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

If you generally hop on your horse 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. On the other hand, 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 may need shoes to be comfortable. If she's not shod under those conditions, it's comparable to asking a person who is normally accustomed to walking on soft, plush carpet to go for a hike barefoot over gravel. Not a fun prospect!

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. Boots can be a great tool to help transition a horse from shoes to barefoot, but there are a few things to keep in mind. Boots must fit properly and need to be monitored to prevent chafing and bruising to the heel bulbs and pastern. It's also important to watch how your horse moves while wearing them. A horse still needs to be able to land heel first and have a full-reaching stride. Because boots can increase the length of the foot and the point of breakover (the pivot point of the foot where it transitions from being flat on the ground to lifting off and moving forward), boots can sometimes prohibit horses from moving as well as they should.

Does my horse have any problems with his feet?

While barefoot is always the preferred choice, there are times when feet that are in trouble (from conditions like founder, ringbone and navicular syndrome) can be greatly helped by appropriate shoeing that addresses things like distortions in the feet, proper bio-mechanics and leverage reduction, as well as support of the frog and other internal structures of the foot to encourage good blood flow and proprioception.

If you do decide to try your horse barefoot, it's important to understand that there is more to it than simply pulling off his shoes. It takes a commitment from you to be an active participant in the process. Being observant of how your horse moves (landing heel first with a full-reaching stride on all four feet) as well as his soundness and comfort level are important during the transition.

You may need to limit your riding during this time. It may be necessary for your farrier or trimmer to tend your horse's feet more frequently to help them maintain proper balance and keep them in good condition. Also, providing a living environment to keep his feet healthy will go a long way toward helping him make the transition as successfully as possible. And finally, a good dose of common sense can go a long way. If your horse persists in being tender and uncomfortable or shows signs of increasing pain and discomfort, he may not be a good candidate to go barefoot.

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

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