

# Basic Foot Care for Horses

By Jen Reid

## Why is foot care so important for my horse?

Conscientious, routine care of your horse's feet can prevent many of the problems that can lead to early retirement and even death. Just like a house needs to sit on a sound foundation, horses need good healthy feet – feet that are free from pain and distortion, and that allow the rest of the body to move naturally. With no hoof, there is no horse!



The hooves of most domesticated horses need to be trimmed regularly. In the wild, horses can walk an average of 20 miles a day in search of food and water. This constant movement wears their feet down and keeps their hooves at an appropriate length. Domesticated horses don't often do this much walking, so we as their caretakers have to step in and hire farriers to tend to our horses' feet.

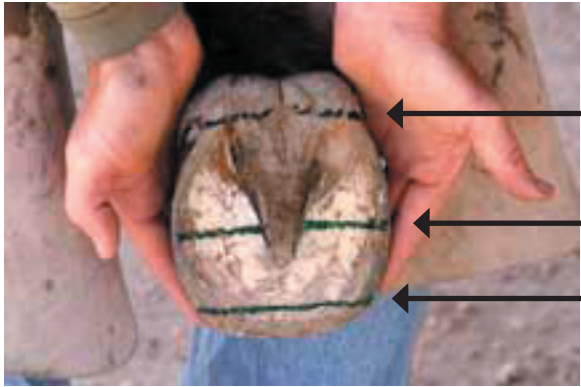
## What is a healthy foot?

Like people, horses' feet are unique to each individual. Furthermore, each foot on a horse is unique to the leg it is attached to. There are lots of variations in shape, size and even color (sometimes on just one horse!). Because of this wide variety, it is difficult to make every foot conform to a set pattern or shape. There are, however, a few basic guidelines you can use to evaluate the health of your horse's feet. (This can be done if the horse is barefoot or has shoes on.)

**Heel-first landing.** Have another person walk your horse on a flat surface. Carefully observe how the horse's feet contact the ground. A healthy foot should land slightly heel first. A foot that lands toe first is a foot that is in trouble. Often, lameness can be seen in the landing of the foot before it becomes evident in the rest of the body. When a horse lands heel first, his bone column is properly supported and the leg is able to move using minimal muscle involvement. In a toe-first landing, the bones of the leg are placed under unnatural pressure, the tendons are subject to extreme forces, and the natural easy movement of the leg forward is interrupted.

Try walking around and landing toe first yourself for a while. You can get around, but there's a lot more impact and you have to use a lot more of your muscles. Imagine the problems that can result over time.

**The view from down under.** Pick up your horse's foot and evaluate the proportions of it. Start by finding the widest part of the foot. With a marker, draw a line across this area. Now find the breakover at the toe and draw a line there. (The breakover is equivalent to the ball of a human foot, where the toe is starting to be rolled up. Just where that roll starts to happen is where to draw your line.) Then, draw a line at the farthest back part of the heel to touch the ground, the heel buttress. (See the photo on the next page.)



*A well-proportioned, healthy foot*

**Heel buttress:** In a healthy foot, it should come to the back of the frog.

**Widest part of the foot:** In a healthy foot, it's generally about a thumb's width behind the point of the frog.

**Point of breakover:** In a healthy, average-size foot, it's about a thumb's width ahead of the point of the frog.

Now look at the distance between the three lines. A healthy foot should have more distance at the back part of the foot than at the front. (A proportion of 2/3 in back to 1/3 in front is ideal in the front feet; in hind feet, 1/2 and 1/2 is acceptable.) Odds are, if your horse has more foot at the toe than at the back, he will also be landing toe first. It's like wearing diving fins and trying to walk around – you just can't move as easily.

**What's that frog for?** The frog is like the gel insert in a running shoe. It is there to provide support to the internal structures of the foot, to absorb and disperse the forces resulting from impact with the ground, and to provide proprioceptors (sensory end organs) that help the horse negotiate the terrain he's walking over. The frog in a healthy foot should be able to have contact with the ground, and should be healthy and robust-looking. A stretched out, shrunken, tiny little frog with a lot of thrush (black, stinky goo) is not a healthy frog and is an indication of problems.

### **How can I help my horse's feet stay (or get) healthy?**

The most important thing you can do is to be aware of your horse's feet. Notice how they grow, how the horse moves, and how the feet contact the ground. You are the most important link in the chain when it comes to your horse's health (feet or otherwise). If you're interested in learning more than the absolute basics, a good place to start is [www.hopeforsoundness.com](http://www.hopeforsoundness.com). This website goes into a bit more detail and provides lots of information about healthy feet, as well as problems like founder and navicular disease. The folks who run the site are extremely knowledgeable and happy to refer you to farriers in your area.

### **How do I choose a good farrier?**

Next to you, your farrier is the most important person when it comes to your horse's feet. There is no licensing required to be a farrier, though, so the skill and knowledge level can vary greatly. Don't just assume that all farriers are the same. When choosing one, keep the following in mind:

**Does the farrier come with a good recommendation?** Talk with other people who have used him/her and look at their horses' feet.

**Is the farrier kind to your horse?** Farrier work is very physically challenging and it can be easy to lose patience with a horse who doesn't stand still, but there is never any excuse to lose your temper and physically abuse a horse.

**Is the farrier open to new ideas?** There are new and exciting discoveries happening all the time in the world of farrier science. You want a farrier who is open and willing to learn, grow and keep abreast of current developments.

**What does your horse think?** As a general rule, your horse should be at least as sound after being shod or trimmed as he was before. If your horse is consistently sore after being worked on, you may want to look for a new farrier. There is no reason that a horse should be tender-footed after every farrier visit.

Basic horse care literally starts from the ground up. Being aware of the health and well-being of your horse's feet is one of the most important parts of his care.

*Jen Reid is a professional farrier who graduated from Mission Farrier School in Redmond, Washington. She has worked at Best Friends' Horse Haven for five years, apprenticing under Ann Hepworth, the resident horse trainer.*