

Horse Foot Bruises

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Cleaning the foot often and after every ride can help you avoid problems such as a stone wedged in a hoof. | Photo: iStock

Understanding what causes foot bruises and how to treat and possibly prevent them can save your horse from sore feet.

While **laminitis** and **navicular disease** pose more dangerous threats to your horse's feet, the average horse is more likely to encounter a foot bruise than any other lameness. If you recognize the causes of foot bruises and understand their treatment and prevention, you can stave off discomfort in your horse and

perhaps avoid an **abscess**, which is a more serious problem that can develop in a bruised hoof.

Most bruises show up on the sole of a horse's foot, although a horse can also bruise the quarters, the toe, and the frog of the foot.

"Often the location of a foot bruise is based on the purpose of the horse," says Meredith May, DVM, now a veterinarian at Terra Vista Animal Hospital, in Rancho Cucamonga, California, who studied stone bruises in the field with Don Shields, DVM, who runs Winner's Circle Ranch. The layup facility in

Bradbury, California, cares for injured racehorses and show horses. Thus, Shields sees his share of foot bruises.

Causes of bruises can range from encounters with rocks, snow, or ice on the trail, to the continual concussive forces of a horse's particular activity, such as a jumper whose front feet hit the ground hard. Shields notes that horses can also bruise their feet when the surface they work on changes (e.g., they transition from a sand arena to hard ground) or is uneven.

"The horse evolved to be walking all day long while it's grazing and then have short bursts of intense speed," says Shields. "We do something totally different with them—moderate to intense levels of exercise over a longer duration."

Genetics and management also play a role in foot bruising. Some horses have softer or **thinner soles** that are more prone to bruising. A flat-footed horse puts more pressure on his soles and bruises more easily, says Shields. If a horse's feet aren't kept clean and dry, they also can become more susceptible to bruising.

Improper trimming and shoeing can cause bruises. A short heel might lead to bruising of the frog; taking too much off the sole can leave it thin and prone to bruising; and a long toe can put too much pressure on the toe and result in bruising.

Bruises often don't show up immediately. You might not actually see the bruise until weeks later.

Once the trauma occurs, blood vessels rupture in the vascular tissue inside the hoof, causing the bruise. How long a bruise takes to show up depends on its depth and the thickness of the horny tissue on the bottom of the foot, notes Shields.

If the bruise is severe enough, a horse will become lame. But an owner might not discover a bruise until the farrier's next visit, when trimming the foot reveals the problem.

The bleeding that occurs when the blood vessels rupture can cause heat in the foot. An owner might notice that one foot is hotter than another. You can sometimes discover heat in a foot by touch, although heat can indicate problems other than a bruise or abscess. Shields recommends a simple technique for finding heat using an infrared laser thermometer available at an auto parts store. A veterinarian or farrier can also find sensitive areas in the foot using hoof testers.

Finding the bruise early not only allows the chance to alleviate the horse's pain, it can prevent the development of an abscess.

Abscesses can occur when bacteria find their way into a bruised area and cause an infection. The pressure built as the pus accrues could make the horse more lame, and the infection might require treatment with antibiotics.

If the bruise abscesses, a veterinarian or farrier will likely cut it out (if possible) to relieve the pressure, then flush the area with an antiseptic solution such as iodine to sterilize and toughen the injury site. If a bruise is bothering the horse, or if it has abscessed, the veterinarian or farrier might pack the foot with gauze or cotton and wrap it.

Shields suggests cold therapy if you notice a problem immediately. If the horse takes a bad step and you discover a rock lodged in his foot, icing can slow the blood flow and minimize bruising.

For bruises discovered several days after development, alternating hot and cold therapy can be helpful. In some cases a veterinarian might prescribe non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications, administration of which depends on the severity of the bruise.

Special boots designed to protect the hoof on the trail, such as those used by endurance riders, can prevent bruises. Cleaning the foot often and after every ride can help you avoid problems such as a stone wedged in a hoof.

If your horse has thin, shelly feet that bruise easily, your farrier might be able to help by applying shoes and pads to protect the sole.

Be vigilant in checking for loose shoes.

“If the horse is able to kick the shoe loose as that foot shifts in the shoe, that might create different (uneven) pressure points,” says May.

Be sure the footing in your arena is consistent. Keep your horse’s stall clean and dry. You can also lessen the chance of bruising by providing proper nutrition, enabling a horse’s system to grow a proper foot.

“We’ll never prevent all bruises,” says Shields. “What we’re trying to do is lessen the number and lessen the severity.”

Take-Home Message

Rocks and repetitive trauma are common causes of foot bruises. Because bruises are ruptured blood vessels above the horny tissue on the bottom of the foot, the bruise won’t usually show up

immediately, perhaps not until the horse is trimmed or shod. Treatment includes cleaning the area to prevent infection and protecting it until the hoof has recovered. You can help prevent bruises with correct shoeing, protective boots, consistent footing, and overall good management.