

HOOF ABSCESSSES

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A hoof abscess is a purulent inflammation of the corium, where the pressure produced by the accumulation of pus between the corium and the hoof causes the horse great pain and leads to pronounced lameness. Hoof abscesses occur both in shod as well as unshod horses. In the following, we are only considering the unshod hoof.

According to conventional educated opinion, a hoof abscess occurs when the horse has pierced the sole with a foreign object — that is, the abscess occurs through infection from the outside.

Hoof abscesses, however, only very rarely arise due to external infecting agents. More commonly, the following occurs: Corium or lateral cartilage areas, which have been compressed for a long time, die off. After circulation is returned to these areas, the dead pieces of tissue are removed from the living tissue and carried to the outside by pus, since the dead pieces of tissue cannot be transported away through the microscopically small blood vessels of the corium.

This process is very common in the transition from shod hoof to barefoot.

When contracted hooves open, sole and heel abscesses must be expected. They are predominantly found in the area of the heels and bars, and sometimes also by the frog, especially near the tip. They also form in places where shoe clips are, and near the rear-most nails. Often excessively long bars which have grown over the sole cause pressure points which later become noticeable as abscesses.



Dead Corium

Dissected hoof showing destruction of the tissues in the hoof from reduced circulation due to improper hoof form.

Photo courtesy Jane Kempton, SHP - UK

It provides the horse with some relief from pain if the abscess is found and opened by an expert. A small round hole cut in the right place allows the pressurised fluid to drain. The abscess is then cleaned with a mild disinfectant, and the hole closed with clean loam, clay, or healing earth. Bandaging is not necessary — quite the opposite, it can be damaging because it restricts circulation. The horse should be let out onto a soft and level pasture or paddock. Movement on soft ground is helpful as it increases blood flow into the hoof, allowing for quicker healing. After 24 hours the hoof should be bathed, the cleaning repeated (with chamomile tea, for example), and the hole again closed with clay. Then the hoof should be left alone for two days. After three days, the corium will be covered with a whitish-yellow skin, the newly-formed sole horn. After one week the sheet of horn will already be thick enough for the horse to walk smoothly on even ground. For sharp stones, however, the sole requires two further weeks of growth.

Sometimes a hoof abscess cannot be found, for example if it is deep in the heel/frog/bars region. In this case, rather than cutting away a large part of the sole or frog (it would be a long time before the horse could bear weight on this foot again!), applying bandaging and leaving the horse in a box — as is often done — one should wait until the abscess finds its own way to the outside. Poultices with warm linseed mash, which soften the horn, are helpful. The pain will lessen as soon as the pus comes out by the coronary band; however, this can take a few days.

For several days afterward, one should bathe the hoof daily in water with a bit of fruit vinegar. Natural hooves with normal circulation (and therefore good blood supply) are very regenerative.

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