

Fact Sheet

Hoof abscess



What is hoof a abscess?

A hoof abscess (also known as puss-in-foot) is defined as a localised accumulation of purulent exudates (pus) located between the germinal and keratinized layers of the hoof wall.

It is the inflammation and the increased pressure exerted on the sensitive tissues by the fluid accumulation, which causes the clinical signs.

Hoof abscesses are one of the most common causes of severe, sudden onset lameness in horses.

Any horse can get a hoof abscess

- Hoof abscesses can occur in shod and unshod horses
- There is no age, sex or breed predilection
- They occur when foreign material i.e. gravel or grit, coupled with infectious organisms i.e. bacteria, gain entry through the hoof capsule and initiate an abscess within the inner subsolar/submural tissue

Signs of a hoof abscess

- Severe lameness, often comparable to that caused by a fracture. Horse may not be able to fully weight bear on limb
- Heat in foot and distal limb
- Bounding digital pulse present
- Sometime the lower limb can swell
- Systemic signs of infection i.e. fever/lethargy if deeper structures are involved
- Draining tract can sometimes be visible at the coronary band



Cause of infection

Infection can enter the hoof in one of three ways:

1. Through a break or fissure in the sole wall junction (white line)
2. A misplaced nail or a puncture wound somewhere in the solar surface of the foot
3. Through a full thickness hoof wall crack or multiple old nail holes



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Diagnosing a hoof abscess

- Observation of clinical signs
- Application of hoof testers – a focal painful area can usually be identified, but not always
- Foot radiographs can be taken in more chronic cases to help identify a gas or fluid pocket



Treating a hoof abscess

- The main treatment for any abscess is drainage
- As soon as you suspect an abscess, call your vet
- Early treatment can release the pus safely, preventing it from finding its own way out, with potentially damaging results
- Once drainage is established, the foot needs to be kept clean and dry in either a foot bandage or poultice
- The hoof should be soaked in either iodine or Epsom salts daily until the infection and inflammation have been eliminated
- Luckily, the vast majority of equine hoof abscesses are quick and easy to treat, most becoming completely comfortable within 24-hours and back in work within a week, with no long-term complications
- Pain relief in the form of anti-inflammatories may sometimes be warranted
- Antibiotics are rarely needed and are usually contraindicated as they can prolong clinical signs and prevent the abscess from draining
- Antibiotics are only ever used if infection is severe or deeper structures have been penetrated

Prevention

- Having routine farrier care is essential to maintain healthy feet
- Environment conditions – a really wet then dry paddock can make the hoof expand and contract, enabling dirt to become lodged in 'pockets' in the hoof wall, leading to foot abscesses
- Check fields regularly to make sure there are no sharp objects lying around, such as broken fence posts with rusty nails sticking out
- Paddock maintenance – to avoid small traumas to the hoof by rocky/uneven footing

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This factsheet was created by the VetPartners Equine Team, with assistance from our Marketing Team and Veterinary Regulatory Advisors.

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