

GENERAL HEALTH CARE

Common foot problems of the donkey - What are they and what to do

Hoof abscesses

Abscesses in the hoof are a common cause of lameness. In donkeys they are most often caused by small stones or other matter penetrating the weakest part of the foot, the junction between the wall and the sole (the "white line"). Bacteria and other micro organisms are also introduced. The white blood cells trying to eliminate this infection accumulate as a build up of "pus" between the hoof wall and the internal sensitive tissue. The pain is often intense and gets worse unless the pressure from the build up of pus is released. Such donkeys will often prefer to lie down and will walk only slowly trying to bear the least possible weight on the affected foot.

- Seek veterinary help as soon as possible and follow any advice closely.
- Ask your vet to explain anything you don't understand, how to apply any dressings if unsure, whether any pain relieving drugs might help and what progress you should expect to see.
- Provide water close by.
- Make sure that your donkey continues to eat. Don't allow fit friends to eat it all!
- Provide shelter and protection.

Foot dressings should be kept clean and changed regularly, probably daily. (Waterproof adhesive tape and "silage bag patches" are useful outer coverings to protect from wet and dirty underfoot conditions.)

- Be warned. Some very lame donkeys will seem to improve if infection breaks out at the coronary band (the top of the hoof). Prompt veterinary attention is still needed.
- Regular tetanus vaccination relieves the worry of this potential complication.
- Wet muddy fields, small sharp stones on tracks and stable floors, delayed farriery and bouts of laminitis all increase the risk of foot abscesses.

Laminitis

Laminitis is a common yet sadly often unrecognised problem of donkeys kept in countries like the UK. Repeated and untreated bouts lead to serious structural damage to the hoof. It is a disease in which the important bonding between the bone in the hoof and the insensitive hoof capsule is damaged along with inflammation of associated sensitive tissue.

Potential causes include:

- Grass rich in carbohydrates. This is often, but not exclusively, new or rapidly growing grass.
- Too much "concentrate" type feed, especially of cereal based mixes.

- Obesity.
- Long feet and poor farriery.
- Certain illnesses and conditions in which laminitis is a possible complication.
- Sudden changes in diet.

Typical signs include:

- Reluctance to move.
- A preference to lie down or stand on softer ground or bedding.
- A change in stance with weight being taken back on the heels.
- Alternate lifting or weight shifting on the fore feet in particular.
- All four feet may be affected.
- An increased "feel" to the pulse in the arteries on either side of the fetlock joint.

Laminitis is a veterinary emergency.

If you suspect laminitis call your vet as soon as possible.

- Follow all veterinary advice closely. Ask your vet to explain anything you don't understand, how to apply any dressings if unsure, whether any pain relieving drugs might help and what progress you should expect to see.
- Prevent access to further excess feed or grazing.
- Do not starve.
- Feed limited meadow hay, feed straw or high fibre low carbohydrate feeds.
- A deeply bedded stable is very useful.
- Rest and minimal walking allows the healing of damaged tissues. Ask for your vet's advice.

To minimise the risk of future problems:

- Restrict access to new or fast growing grass by limiting the time allowed for grazing or by the use of moveable fencing.
- Make all diet changes gradually.
- Avoid high-energy carbohydrate rich feeds. There are many suitable high fibre feeds now available from well known feed companies whose advice can be sought.
- Diet fat donkeys carefully.
- Have feet trimmed regularly.

"Thrush"

Wet muddy under foot conditions, damp and dirty bedding, and neglected trimming of the frog all combine to make infections of the frog and adjacent hoof more likely. A black foul-smelling discharge is often noticed and this is typical of "thrush". It may progress to cause ulceration of the frog particularly towards the bulbs of the heel. (Bandages which become wet and rub or poultices applied for too long a time are also likely to result in thrush developing.)

Successful treatment necessitates:

- Thorough trimming of the foot to remove all overgrown or under-run tissue. Remember to check all four feet.
- The conditions in which the donkey is kept must be improved to prevent reoccurrence, particularly if housed for any length of time.
- Your farrier or vet will be able to advise on an appropriate antiseptic dressing or treatment.
- Remember to book the farrier to return at regular intervals i.e. every 6 - 10 weeks.

Chronic/Longstanding foot problems

Chronic Laminitis/Founder

The bonding between the hoof capsule and the last limb bone is progressively weakened by each attack of laminitis. Consequently, repeated bouts of laminitis, which often go unrecognised, result in long term and frequently permanent changes to the structure of the hoof.

Signs of this problem include the following:

- "Growth rings" on the outside of the hoof which are nearer together at the toe than the heel. (The hoof wall when viewed from the side may be more upright at the top near the coronary band than lower down.)
- A sole that is convex, and possibly thin and painful.
- The donkey may move with a slower "pottery" gait, taking weight more on the heels with the shoulders prominent.
- Recurrent foot problems such as abscesses, seedy toe and white line disease.
- A history of obesity, excess grazing and infrequent farriery.

Owners of donkeys suffering from such problems should consider the following advice, which may help to stabilise the condition and maximise the quality of life for their donkey:

- Seek regular veterinary advice and ask for a routine general check over at least once a year.
- Have feet trimmed with care and checked by the farrier regularly. Individual donkeys will vary in their rate of hoof growth and trimming intervals need to be adjusted accordingly.
- A deep clean well managed bed provides a comfortable rest from standing on sore feet, clean wood shavings are ideal.
- Fat animals should be carefully dieted.
- A balanced high fibre diet should be fed with supplements and additives only on veterinary advice.
- Beware anything likely to trigger future bouts of laminitis.
- Avoid muddy paddocks and dirty wet beds.
- Pick out and clean feet at least once daily.
- Unfortunately it is inevitable that some donkeys' hooves will gradually deteriorate to the point where pain is constant. Treatment, including analgesics, may be to no avail. Sadly, in such cases one has to look at

euthanasia as being the final act of caring for your donkey. (See dealing with death/euthanasia.)

White line disease and seedy toe

The "white line" is the weakest part of the base of the hoof between the wall and the sole. When this area becomes filled with small stones and other debris it is referred to as "white line disease".

"Seedy toe" is a condition affecting the hoof wall outside of the white line, and may be seen to spread from an obvious point of penetration of the white line. Bacteria and fungi, normally present in the environment, multiply in these pockets and cause decay of the normal hoof structure. The hoof wall takes on an abnormal grey crumbly texture. Areas affected vary in size from barely visible to extensive separation of the wall from the underlying white line. These larger cavities may be filled with a mix of debris and decaying hoof wall and sound hollow on tapping.

These problems of white line disease and seedy toe are not in themselves generally painful but they do put the animal at greater risk of abscesses, which would cause more severe lameness.

Factors which may help to cause these problems include:

- Damp dirty bedding.
- Muddy paddocks.
- Continuous contact with faeces and urine.
- Poor diet.
- Delayed farriery.
- Recurrent/chronic laminitis.
- Old age.

All of these factors must be considered when looking at the treatment and control of white line disease and seedy toe. It would certainly seem to be true that the worse the changes of chronic laminitis, and the wetter and dirtier the environment, the more difficult it is to resolve the situation. Successful treatment is more likely when owner, vet and farrier work together, each playing their part. Unfortunately there are no simple and quick remedies.