

Hoof Abscess

Signs of a hoof abscess

Hoof abscesses are one of the most common causes of sudden and severe lameness in the horse. They can develop very quickly, and within 12 hours the horse may be reluctant to put his hoof on the ground, leading to a toe-pointing stance. Other signs to look for include elevated digital pulses, heat within the hoof wall, and swelling of the lower limb.

What is a hoof abscess?

A hoof abscess is a localised bacterial infection within the sensitive structures of the hoof. Pus is produced and accumulates within the hoof wall or under the sole, depending on the location of the abscess. Since the hoof cannot expand, the increased pressure causes significant pain. The pus will take the path of least resistance to relieve the pressure and if left untreated, will usually work its way up the hoof wall, breaking out at the coronary band or the bulbs of the heel. Most hoof abscesses we see are caused by white line separation. Mud and dirt pack into the area of separation, and when the hoof gets wet, this moisture encourages bacterial growth. White blood cells are sent to the area of infection, and pus is formed as the horse's immune system attempts to fight the infection. This explains why we see most abscesses in winter- particularly when horses are kept in muddy, boggy paddocks.



Treatment

Treatment is aimed at developing solar drainage of the abscess. Hoof testers enable us to locate the sensitive area, and then using a hoof knife, we can pare away the overlying tissue to drain the abscess. Poulticing is helpful as it softens the sole and encourage the infection out. Tetanus prophylaxis is vital when a horse has a hoof abscess.