

Foot Care for Foals

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A foal's future performance in competition, or as a pleasure riding companion, depends in large part on how his feet are cared for in the first six months of his life. Normally, hoof care for a foal is best started at 30 days, according to Stephen O'Grady, DVM, MRCVS, a professional farrier with Northern Virginia Equine in The Plains, Va.



ANNE EBERHARDT

Proper foot care is necessary to make sure the foal has every chance to grow up with straight legs and good feet; if you wait too long to solve a problem in the growing foal, it can become a permanent issue.

"Generally, one month of age is the best time to have a farrier or veterinarian-farrier combination evaluate the foal's foot and limb conformation," he states. "This examination serves as a baseline for maintenance and possible corrections that can affect the foal the rest of his life."

However, if obvious conformational or lameness problems are apparent before one month of age, then the foal should be examined sooner.

According to Reggie Kester, American Farrier's Association Certified Journeyman Farrier and owner of Oklahoma State Horseshoeing School, whose horses are raised outside on dry, arid land, "If you don't have a problem, there's no reason to trim until he or she is six to eight months old."

Kester agrees that there are times when foals need their feet tended to as early as 30 days. "We get calls from folks who get all excited and worried when their foal is three days old. But foals are most always a little crooked in the legs when they are first born and until maybe 30 days old. Fortunately, they often grow out of it.

"In this region, we typically start trimming at six months old, when the foals are weaned and halter-broken. Now if I have a colt with one foot a little crooked or one that needs attention, I'll work on just that one foot," he is quick to add. "But the horses in the West are usually wild until they are brought up to be weaned and halter-broken. At that time, we begin to work on their feet.

"On the big horse farms," he continues, "they start working on the feet sooner. Those high-dollar horses are usually stalled at night and let out to pasture during the day, and the foals are halter-broken early. But generally the average horse, at least out West, is not as confined as some of the high-dollar horses. Thus, the foals out on pasture that is dry and abrasive wear their feet down more than those that are confined.

"I raise a few foals, and, as long as their feet look good, I won't trim until they are five or six months old," states Kester. "But it is hard for a novice owner to know what is right and what isn't right. They need to have their farrier look at the foal's feet."

Evaluating the Foal

O'Grady emphasizes the importance of using the services of a farrier and an equine veterinarian with an interest in podiatry to evaluate the foal. While there are farriers who can competently evaluate the hoof conformation of a foal, many might not have experience examining the limb structure above the foot.

The foal should be evaluated standing on a hard, flat surface and in motion on a level surface. "First, look at the foal standing still from the front," says Stephen O'Grady, DVM, MRCVS. "You could place imaginary dots starting above the knee, continuing to place them above and below each joint, and at the toe of the foot. Draw an imaginary line connecting these dots. The dots should form a straight line."

If the foal is toeing out or toeing in, for example, using these imaginary dots and lines can help you to detect if the malalignment is a result of the foot conformation, or if the deviation originates from the limb above.

"Toeing in or out is often caused by abnormalities above the hoof," explains O'Grady. "Depending on where it originates, you can use extensions (made out of a composite and attached to the foot), braces, or perhaps surgical correction."

"When viewing the hoof from the side, check the hoof/pastern alignment by connecting imaginary dots again, at the center of the fetlock, pastern, coronary band and the ground," O'Grady adds. "If this line doesn't form a straight line, you may have a club foot conformation where the coffin joint is pulled forward, or a low heel where the joint is pulled downward or what we call broken back."

If it is difficult to view the foal moving in a straight line, simply have the mare and foal led alongside a straight fence, with the foal between the mare and the fence, to keep him moving in a straight line. When the foal is in motion, watch how the foot hits the ground. Does the foot land evenly or does the outside or inside hoof wall contact first? Ideally, it should land evenly or flat.

Fixing Problems

There are a few situations that you must begin to deal with immediately, thus the expertise of a veterinarian and farrier is necessary. In these cases, work out a plan of action with your farrier and veterinarian to improve or correct the problem before it is too late.

"One problem is an angular limb deformity referred to as varus fetlocks," states O'Grady, "which must be treated by one month of age. With this problem, the fetlocks deviate laterally (outward) and the foal looks bowlegged, but in the fetlocks rather than the knees. We fabricate extensions (to glue on the hoof) on these fetlocks, and they respond dramatically."

Another problem that is not uncommon is a flexural deformity—one example is a club foot. A club foot occurs when the heel grows much higher or longer than the toe, giving a very steep angle to the hoof at the toe. This is also called a broken-forward hoof-pastern axis, with the problem being an overly tight deep digital flexor tendon (DDFT) that overflexes the coffin joint.

Although it is not fully understood what causes a club foot, O'Grady says, "If you don't

recognize and deal with this situation immediately, this animal is going to go into adulthood with abnormal foot shape. In a mild case, you can rasp the heels off a little bit. But in other cases, you may have to deal with it by using medication such as oxytetracycline (to relax the overly tight DDFT), decreasing exercise, applying toe extensions, or possibly through surgical correction. If you wait until this foal is six or eight months old, you already have a hoof capsule distortion and very little or no chance of resolving it."

Kester heartily agrees. "There are very few problems that occur and need fixing," he says, "but a foal with a club foot needs immediate attention. I worry more about a club foot than toeing out or toeing in.

"If you can see a club foot beginning, you can sometimes head it off," he adds. "Recently I had one foal getting upright on her front feet. I left some toe but cut a lot of heel off, and she is starting to improve. No doubt, she would have been club-footed if I hadn't addressed the situation."

Flexural deformities can be congenital (present at birth) or acquired. A congenital flexural deformity can be caused by malpositioning of the fetus in the uterus, nutritional management of the mare during gestation, or possibly exposure to influenza virus. Flexural deformities acquired after birth can result from excessive carbohydrates, unbalanced minerals, and, among other things, a response to pain, perhaps even brought on from over-zealous trimming techniques. (Pain or discomfort in some areas of the foot, for example, can make a foal shift his body weight to the toe, causing the flexor muscles to contract.)

"In the early stages, you can decrease the exercise by stalling them and administering mild doses of analgesics (painkillers). Often they will do fine," says O'Grady.

Managing Normal Feet

Assuming the foal does not have angular limb or flexural deformities, hoof care merely requires wire brushing each foot to take any loose debris off the bottom and a little rasping every four to six weeks. Foals normally have pointed toes at a month of age. Rasping off these tips and squaring the toes a little bit allow the feet to break over straight.

"A developing foal's foot does not grow enough hoof wall to drastically lower it on either side more than a few rubs, on either side, with a rasp," explains O'Grady. "If you trim more than a few millimeters at each trim, on either side, you are taking the

foot out of balance. This will result in abnormal growth rings at the coronary band within a couple of weeks."

O'Grady explains how to rasp the foot properly. "Holding the foot between your legs, looking at the bottom of the foot, minimally rasp the wall at a 90-degree angle. It makes a sharp angle, so you then run the rasp around the perimeter so that you have a very nice, rounded hoof."

He cautions that trimming too frequently and trimming very short will encourage development of thin, fragile hoof walls. Your goal is to produce growth of a solid hoof mass. You don't want a foot that is spread out like a cow patty, nor do you want a tiny, steep-angled hoof.

O'Grady likened shaping foals' feet to growing long fingernails. "If you decided you wanted long fingernails, you don't just let them grow unchecked," he explains. "You trim them periodically so that they grow into a nice, pleasing shape and length. It is the same with the foals' feet.

"By trimming the foal's feet correctly and consistently, you set the stage for the best possible development of the hooves into adult life," O'Grady says.

At two months of age, flares in the hoof wall can appear. "These flares should be removed by rasping the lower part of the hoof wall from the outside," says O'Grady.

O'Grady clarifies that when using the words "trim" or "trimming," when speaking of foals under—but not confined to—six months of age, he is not referring to using hoof nippers. "Up until six months of age, you should use only a wire brush and rasp," he reiterates. "I feel it is detrimental to take a hoof knife to the bottom of a foal's foot. There is basically nothing to remove on the ground surface of a foal's foot. You want to allow as much sole to remain as possible, providing protection for the bottom of that foot and the developing structures above."

Environment plays a part in the wear or lack of wear on foals' feet. "A foal walking on soft ground, such as we've had this past year due to excessive rainfall," he says, "does not get as much ground resistance or counter pressure from the ground to wear some of the foot off. This foal will grow more heel and toe than, say, a foal on rocky, dry terrain. If left untrimmed, the foot has the opportunity, depending on the limb above, to distort and take on some abnormal shape to the hoof capsule. And as the hoof grows toward the ground, the hoof capsule at the ground surface is much more brittle than it is at the growth center, up at the coronary band. As the hoof becomes

longer, it is going to split, creating cracks and chips that allow debris to get in, resulting in problems, including abscesses."

In most cases it is a simple procedure for the farrier to rasp a little bit of the toe off every four to six weeks, evaluating the foal at a standstill and in motion prior to the work. As the owner, you should make note of any measurements and deviations from the norm, so that any problems can be watched carefully and addressed as needed. Also, your notes will record the success of any corrections and point out when further action is needed. You can never have too much information about your horse's health, including his feet. Vigilance is the key to keeping problems small and easily handled.