Foal Hoof Care

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Foaling season is upon us. If you have a young foal or are expecting one soon, remember the important things you can do to ensure the foal gets a good foundation for hoof care. Crooked legs on young horses can be a big problem.

Assess the foal’s limbs soon after birth. Most mild limb deformities can be handled by stall rest that limits exercise. Many problems are due to lack of cartilage and bone maturity and will improve with time if the affected area is not stressed. If there is more than a 5-degree deviation in the limb, or concerns about the straightness of the legs, your veterinarian should assess the situation and make recommendations at this time.

The hooves should not be trimmed until the foal is at least two weeks old, and then only if a problem is evident.

Horses’ bones are very malleable when they are young. In fact, most long bones in the horse’s legs are not completely formed. On the ends of each of the long bones there are plates (known as epiphyseal growth plates) that fuse (or close) as the horse gets older and develops. It is important to treat limb deviations before the epiphyseal growth plates of the lower leg bones close at about three months (short pastern), six months (long pastern), and nine months (distal cannon bone). After these plates close, very little structural change can be made in the limb by trimming or shoeing. It is questionable how much change can actually be made before that time. Severe angular (conformation) defects cannot be eliminated by corrective trimming or shoeing. Serious problems may require periostial stripping or check ligament surgery. Future plans for the horse should be considered in making this decision as its athletic career.

A foal’s feet should be checked by a competent farrier by the time it is two months old. You can help prepare your foal for the farrier’s first visit by (1) teaching the foal to stand and lead, (2) picking up and holding the foal’s feet daily, (3) providing the farrier a safe corner in which to trim the foal’s hooves, (4) having an experienced person hold the foal for the farrier, and (5) having an experienced person hold the mare close at hand.

Imprint training should be started as soon after birth as possible in order to begin the process of desensitization of the foal to the farrier. To do this, rub down the legs and pat the bottom of the hoof with your hand 40 or 50 times on each foot or until the foal relaxes. Repeat daily and then weekly and finally monthly. It is also important to clean out a foal’s feet each time the animal is handled to accustom it to foot handling.

Regular foot balancing will allow the foal to grow as straight as possible. The focus of trimming should be on keeping the weight of the foal evenly distributed over the limbs. The foal’s hoof may be trimmed more often than that of a mature horse, but less hoof is removed. The excess wall is trimmed down to the level of the sole at the toe.
Keeping the hoof length the same on the inner and outer sides of the leg (medial/lateral balance) is critical. This must be maintained because a foal frequently wears one side or the other unevenly. The animal will learn to compensate for minor structural faults. Avoid over-trimming of the sole and thus removing protection from the coffin bone. Trimming one side lower in an effort to straighten legs produces sheared heels.

Medial or lateral extension shoes made from aluminum or plastic may be glued or nailed to the feet of crooked foals to help in the distributing of weight more evenly over the bone column. Shoeing the foot may protect it from wearing away faster than it grows and sometimes it is necessary to maintain a balanced stance. If a horse is shod during the growing months, shoes should be reset frequently (every 3 to 4 weeks) and progressively larger shoes applied.

Having the hoof trimmed out of medial/lateral balance in an effort to straighten bones is not a good practice. Excessive stresses on the joint may cause damage, but the most noticeable effect will be the creation of a sheared heel. This may cause circulatory disturbance and lameness. The edges of a foal's hooves should be kept rounded to avoid chipping.

When a young horse begins serious training, regular trimming and hoof care should include shoes that protect the foot or are necessary to enhance the action of the specific type of horse.