

PREVENT LAMENESS, KEEP YOUR HORSE SOUND

Here's a handy summary of recommendations to prevent lameness and keep your horse sound.
By Barb Crabbe, DVM, with Jennifer Forsberg Meyer

Follow my strategies to at least reduce the chances you'll ever be the *cause* of a lameness in that horse you treasure.



Proper, timely shoeing is perhaps the most important thing you can do to safeguard the health of your horse's feet and legs. Not all farriers are created equal, so get recommendations from someone you trust. Then keep the lines of communication open; and as soon as you suspect a problem, address it. Benign neglect doesn't work here.

Work footing needs to be deep enough to lessen concussion but not so deep that it strains tendons or ligaments: Tendon and ligament injuries take the longest to heal, and some never do, so prevention is key. (Two sources of footing advice: Robert Malmgren's *Equine Arena Handbook*, from Alpine Publications and available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com); and *Underfoot*, from the US Dressage Federation at 402-434-8575 or its [online store](#).) Hack-ing out, avoid rocky or slippery surfaces and footing you can't see.

Stall footing should be level and dry -- and don't scrimp on the straw or shavings. It's called "bedding" for a reason. It's not there just to soak up urine; it needs to be deep enough to encourage your horse to get off his feet and rest.

Check legs and feet before and after every ride. Also watch your horse trot briefly on a short longe line once a week. If you know what's normal for your horse, you become your own best early-detection system.

Careful conditioning. Riding at least every other day avoids "weekend warrior" syndrome, but don't overdo it. Regular long, slow distance work -- walking -- helps keep tendons and ligaments tight and healthy. And even though you want your horse in good flesh, you're not loving him by feeding him too much. Excess weight stresses joints, tendons, and ligaments.

Plenty of turnout. I prefer solitary turnout, in a small, mud-free, well-fenced paddock, with the horse wearing protective boots. If he starts to run like crazy, bring him in; turn him out again after he's been worked.

Warm-up/cool-down. Ten minutes of an active, stretching walk gets tissues warmed and joints working freely before you introduce a lot of stress. After work, walk at least ten minutes to cool down.

Avoid pounding. Endless circling, round-pen work or longeing can cause injury. Balance is especially important on a circle. If a horse's weight is evenly balanced over his four legs -- so he's not leaning in dramatically -- he's much less likely to strain his legs. If he's having trouble with balance, work on a larger circle. And instead of jumping, school over ground poles where possible.

Leg protection. I prefer polo wraps; they provide good support and protection when applied properly. (A good groom can show you how.) Ask your vet about recommendations for your horse. She or he can also advise you on measures such as icing, poulticing and applying stable bandages after stressful workouts.

Supplements. Formulated for a variety of purposes, some supplements have research that supports their use, but they're expensive to use on a sound horse. Ask your vet which, if any, might be appropriate for your horse.

Alternative therapies. I've especially seen good results with chiropractic and acupuncture, and I use regular massage therapy on my own horses. But be careful before you plunk down a lot of money, and get advice from a vet who's knowledgeable about alternative measures -- not all vets are.

Barb Crabbe, DVM, is an equine practitioner and dressage competitor based in Portland, Oregon.