

Cinder Hill Equine Clinic



Hoof Abscesses - Pus in the foot

What is it?

A hoof abscess describes a painful build-up of purulent material (pus) within the hoof capsule. It will often be extremely uncomfortable for the horse, causing an obvious lameness at walk. Foot abscesses are caused by bacteria entering the hoof capsule and setting up an infection. The bacteria can enter in several ways. Often the bacteria tracks up the white line, but it can also occur following farriery or injury such as standing on a sharp object. The first sign you will notice as an owner is a sudden and severe lameness in one leg. Often the digital pulses to the affected hoof will be raised, and the hoof may feel warm.

What should I do?

The most important first step is making sure that it is a foot abscess, and not another cause of severe lameness. Other problems that can appear similar at first include laminitis, cellulitis, tendon injury and fractures. Your horse should be put on box rest and a vet called to assess the situation. If you are suspicious of a foot abscess, a poultice can be applied whilst you are waiting for veterinary assistance.

What will the vet do?

Your vet will first examine your horse, assessing how lame they are and looking for any other injuries. They will feel for heat and an increased digital pulse, and then will often use hoof testers to apply pressure to the hoof, looking for any sore areas. If a hoof abscess is suspected, they will explore the sole with a hoof knife, looking for draining tracts to release the pus. If this is not possible, it is likely that the horse will be put on box rest with a hot, wet poultice on to soften the hoof capsule and allow any purulent material to drain.

Will my horse be ok afterwards?

Once the purulent material is released, the pressure build up in the hoof reduces and the horse is immediately more comfortable. They may need poulticing for a few days afterwards to make sure that all the infection is gone. In a simple hoof abscess, your horse should be almost sound within a few days and go on to make a full recovery.

Will it happen again?

Some horses seem to be prone to hoof abscesses. This may be because of their living conditions (wet, muddy conditions soften the hoof and predispose to infection) or because of the anatomy of their hooves. If a recurrent hoof abscess occurs, however, it is sensible to rule out any underlying conditions, such as PPID (Cushing's syndrome) or a pedal bone fracture. If your horse suffers from recurrent hoof abscesses, your vet can advise on a sensible course of action. Sometimes an X-ray of the hoof can be helpful.