

Ask A Vet: Do All Horses Need Shoes?

Sunday, December 29, 2013

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My sister and I are getting our first horse soon. We have moved to a small farm with a few acres of pasture that our horse will be spending most of his time in. Do we need to keep shoes on him or can we let him go barefoot?

Dear Reader,

The answer to your question depends on several factors. Horseshoes protect horses' hooves from excessive wear but not every horse needs them. For example buggy horses driven many miles on paved roads obviously need their feet protected by well fitting shoes that are reset frequently and have cleats that give them traction on slick surfaces. Performance horses that turn or stop suddenly also need this protection and added traction. A horse's environment is also a factor as well as their lifestyle. If they spend most of their time in a barn or small paddock they don't get the exercise needed to keep their hooves in shape compared to a pastured horse. Horses in the wild keep their feet from overgrowing and toughened by constant free range movement in a variety of environmental conditions.

If you intend to use your horse for casual trail rides and don't ride on rocky or paved surfaces and they spend their days on soft pasture they can probably go barefoot. A horse's hooves constantly grow just as your finger and toe nails do and they will need regular trimming by a farrier. Keep in mind that to be ridden without shoes your horse's hooves need to be toughened up on a similar surface you intend to ride on. A horse living in a soft pasture then taken for a trail ride on a rocky trail will sore up quickly. You may need shoes on a seasonal basis and pull them when the riding season slows or ends.

Conformation, joint and hoof health, hoof moisture, and hoof flexibility also are factors to consider. I once owned a horse that had dry splitting hooves that had to be constantly shod even on soft pasture. Supplements to keep hooves flexible help but some horses are prone to these problems and regardless of their environment will need to be kept shod. Certain types of arthritis and foot injuries are helped by a veterinarian's diagnosis and corrective shoeing by a talented farrier. These horses can often have a productive life with shoes specially designed for their problem.

Best wishes on your upcoming equine ownership. Remember good nutrition, health care, and regularly maintained hoof care are your responsibility as a horse owner.

-Dr. Jerry Sellon