

Laminitis

WHAT IS LAMINITIS?

Laminitis is one of the commonest causes of lameness and disability of ponies, and to a lesser extent horses, in this country. It is a crippling and painful disease of the hooves, is often chronic and sometimes incurable.

The disease involves the laminae of the hoof. These are the fleshy structures which coat the horn wall and outside of the bone in the foot - the pedal bone. The laminae on these two surfaces fit together like corrugated cardboard. Because they have a large surface area (about the size of a tennis court if they are unravelled) they hold the bone securely within the hoof. The laminae have a rich blood supply which provides them with nutrition and keeps the hoof-bone bond strong and vital.

Laminitis is a failure of the hoof-bone bond occurring because of a disturbance to the blood supply of the hoof, which stops the laminae working properly. This means that the bone moves within the hoof and the weight of the pony together with the pull of the flexor tendons cause the bone to rotate downwards. If the bone moves too far it will come through the sole of the foot and the pony will have to be put down. If the degree of rotation is not too great then it may in time, with skilled farriery, be returned to its normal position.



WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF LAMINITIS?

The cause of laminitis is not always known, however, the following situations can bring on an attack:-

- OBESITY - This is the commonest cause of laminitis
- AN EXCESSIVE SUPPLY OF GRASS OR GRAIN
- TOXAEMIA - caused by viral or bacterial infections or retention of the afterbirth in newly foaled mares
- FAST OR PROLONGED WORK on hard surfaces, such as constant 'hammering' on the road - the resultant concussion can bring on a bout
- HORMONAL DISEASE
- STRESS - such as over-working



Animals that have suffered from laminitis in the past are more susceptible to recurrence

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Laminitis can affect all four feet either individually or in combination. Although all four feet may be equally affected, the disease is most obvious in the front feet as these take 60% of the pony's weight. Where all four feet are affected, the pony will stand with its legs underneath its body - the rocking horse stance. Where the front feet are most affected, the pony will stand with its forelegs stretched out in front leaning back onto its hind legs.



The hooves of an animal with laminitis are hot to the touch and the animal will constantly shift its weight from one foot to another, resting each leg in turn. The animal will be reluctant to move although those with a mild case may be willing to walk, putting the heel down first and lifting the foot quickly.

Because laminitis is a very painful condition, affected animals may sweat and breathe rapidly. In severe cases, ponies will lie down and refuse to rise.

If an animal has previously had laminitis, a prolonged dry period or a frosty spell that causes the ground to become hard, may cause the condition to re-occur. It is advisable to bed him on soft shavings or peat for part of the day, or night, if you suspect laminitis may be imminent.



WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Laminitis is a veterinary emergency. Call the vet immediately. He/she will be able to alleviate the pain and treat the condition. In the meantime, if the animal is at pasture, stable it immediately on a deep non-edible bed, where it can lie down. Pack the foot with peat or make a small rolled bandage down the length of the frog. This will help to support the pedal bone. Do not force the animal to take exercise as this could make the situation much worse. Bathe the lower legs for 10 - 20 minutes every hour with luke-warm, NOT COLD, water. Do not starve the animal as this could have serious consequences and could cause other conditions. If dieting is necessary, it should be done gradually using a combination of alfalfa chop, straw and hay, fed according to body condition. Bran is a poor diet. Ask the farrier to attend regularly as correct foot trimming is important because the foot tends to elongate after laminitis.

HOW CAN I PREVENT LAMINITIS?

The chances of laminitis can be reduced by following these simple rules:-

Do not overfeed your animal and cause it to become overweight

Never change the pasture from poor to rich for 24 hours a day. Any change should be gradual.

Do not let small ponies get too fat in summer as the extra weight puts strain on their feet making them susceptible to laminitis. A simple preventative measure is to keep the pony in a cool stable during the day and let it out at night when it will eat less.

Check mares that are foaling to ensure that the afterbirth has come away completely.

Always keep the feed room door closed in case an animal escapes and chooses to help himself!

Remember! You can bring on a bout of laminitis by constant trotting on hard surfaces. Unshod, laminitic animals should not be trotted or cantered on roads, frozen ground or any hard, rough surface.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

WILL HE GET IT AGAIN?

Sadly, the answer is probably yes. An animal that has previously suffered from laminitis often becomes more susceptible to further attacks.

A laminitic animal's feet will grow more quickly so keep a careful eye on his feet and get your farrier to attend regularly. It is also important to manage your animal's grazing carefully. In spring, restrict grazing to 2-3 hours daily if the grass is rich.

Consider erecting a small, secure paddock in the corner of a field where grazing can become poor (note - It is important to collect droppings from the paddock to avoid worm problems) or keep the animal stabled during the day. It is better to feed small amounts of hay on poor pasture than to allow a laminitic animal free access to lush grazing.

NOTE

Another form of laminitis causes the sole to be under-run by pus. It is not obvious to an inexperienced person as there can be little heat in the foot, but the animal may be in intense pain. It is always important to ask your veterinary surgeon's advice, as a wrong diagnosis by a misinformed friend can prolong agony in a laminitic pony.