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New Hope for Laminitis Prevention and Treatment

Spring grass will bring with it the worry for many horse owners that their horses may over-eat and contract the debilitating disease, Laminitis. While rich grass and obesity are the main factors that may cause this painful condition, veterinary research has been concentrating on two underlying diseases that predispose horses, and even more so, ponies to this crippling problem. In the first part of this article Erik Belloy, partner at The Horse Clinic, will explain what these underlying conditions are. In the second part, he will give you tips to help you if your horse suffers an episode of laminitis.

Underlying Conditions

Many older horses suffer from Cushing's disease, a disturbance of the normal hormone mechanism. In this disease, the pituitary gland becomes over-active, which can cause all sorts of problems such as a long, curly haired-coat, colic, weight-loss, lowering of the immunity and.....laminitis. Cushing's disease can be identified with blood tests a lot easier and more accurately than it used to be a few years ago. Because treatment can often be effective, identifying horses that suffer, can contribute greatly to horse welfare. The disease of plenty that many horse owners fear is called Metabolic Disease, often also named equine diabetes or Insulin Resistance. This syndrome can make horses very unwell, and leave owners tearing their hair out because suffering horses will not lose any weight in spite of cutting their feed intake down. These horses have serious abnormalities that make them unable to deal with sugar intake. It is precisely those animals that are severely at risk from eating sugar-rich

spring grass. Vets have suspected the disease for a long time, but there were no conclusive blood tests or treatment, which meant the diagnosis could not be made. Thankfully, a new and very inexpensive treatment borrowed from human diabetes treatment has helped a lot of horses to lose weight and feel better. More importantly, the risk of developing laminitis goes down considerably in treated animals. Again, a simple blood test can help identify the animals that suffer from Metabolic disease. Apart from medication, diet and exercise are important in the treatment of this syndrome. Unfortunately, if your horse already suffers from laminitis, exercise may not be possible

If you have any suspicions that your horse may suffer any of these diseases, avoid spring grass until you have confirmed their status with blood tests. As treatment can be protective against laminitis, both Cushing's Disease and Metabolic Disease should be diagnosed and treated as early as possible to avoid permanent damage to feet. It would be better to pick up at risk patients before they need extensive treatment for the often very painful effects of laminitis.

What to do in laminitis?

1. **Carry out blood tests and treat underlying disease.** The tests can identify those that are at risk, but also helps to avoid recurrence and speeds up recovery
2. **Call your vet as soon as you suspect your horse has laminitis.** Early treatment with painkillers, anti-inflammatory drugs and vasodilators can affect a speedier and more humane recovery. Untreated attacks often lead to displaced pedal bones.
3. **Rest the horse immediately and until it is no longer sore.** Rest avoids further damage to feet that are compromised. Rest will help with pain management. Do not be fooled: after 5 minutes walking, your pony may look more comfortable, but the walking can do more

damage, which is likely to lead to more pain and longer suffering. As a rule of thumb, horses should rest for at least 14 days more than it takes them to come sound (off painkillers).

4. **Provide frog support and place the horse on deep bedding.** Laminitis causes damage to the laminae inside the horse's foot. This damage leads to instability, and the pedal bone may become loose within the hoof. The toes are often the sore part of the foot. Frog support can provide pain relief and prevent further movement of the bone. Home-made supports can help, but your vet and farrier may be able to provide better custom-made supports
5. **Feed the horse on low calorie fibre sources.** Fermentation of sugars and starches (which are abundantly present in spring and autumn grass, as well as in grain diets) can lead to release of toxins that can trigger the laminitic attack. Excess weight can cause an attack, and certainly puts the horse at risk of developing Metabolic Disease, which can in turn cause laminitis.
6. **Get the feet X-rayed if the horse is still sore after 7-14 days.** If the horse is still sore at this point, the pedal bone may have moved. The feet may now need trimming, and shoeing to re-position the bone within the foot and in order to protect sore areas of the pedal bone from pain and necrosis. These radiographs will help to formulate a treatment plan, but can give an indication of the horse's chances of getting better as well.
7. **Make sure your vet and farrier collaborate closely** to make the most of the X-rays. It is vital for recovery that both professionals work closely together. Your farrier will need to adjust the feet in order to prevent further movement of the bone within the hoof. The horse may be sore when having this done, and

special shoes may have to be applied. Most shoeing methods will require frog support after trimming, but the wrong frog support could lead to further damage. X-rays will show the position of the bone, but this is a dynamic situation and the X-rays need to be very recent to avoid trimming the horse in a way that damages the feet further. Often, more X-rays need to be taken after trimming to make sure that enough foot was removed, and to establish the best way of halting the process.

8. **Understand that every attack of laminitis can be potentially fatal.** It is vital to avoid your pony developing laminitis. Prevention is of course better than cure. In the case of this crippling disease, this is even more true than most other conditions. Early detection of risk factors and avoiding obesity at any point in the horse's life can go a very long way to avoiding it. Once your horse has the disease, treatment can turn the odds around, but many horses will still succumb to the disease because treatment can be expensive, and horses may be sore for a long time before getting better, or never recover.

Laminitis can be a real risk to your horse's long-term future. Some horses may have to be euthanased after a laminitic attack, others may never become 100% sound. Prevention, early treatment and close co-operation between the vet and farrier are the most effective ways of avoiding your horse or pony falling prey to this condition.



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