



Laminitis

Ethical and Welfare considerations

Laminitis is an inflammation and ultimately a breakdown of the attachment between the pedal bone and the inner aspect of the hoof wall. The extent of the damage to these attachments can vary from insignificant and just causing temporary pain, to severe and even permanent. There are many treatments available for laminitis, but not many of those have been scientifically evaluated.

There is a very wide range of treatment options available to horses with laminitis. Initially, some pain control and minimal trimming and shoeing is almost certainly going to be employed to try and restore the horse back to normality. Most vets are in agreement that it is humane to use painkillers in sore animals, but their use is not necessarily going to help the long-term outcome.

More complicated treatment options including x-rays, frog supports, corrective shoes, specially manufactured shoes, and surgical interventions are all potentially considered. It is almost impossible to identify every possible treatment available nor is it possible to discuss every type of shoe. A combination of the farrier's preference



and the vet's preference is likely to play a role in which treatment is chosen for each case, often treatment may need to be adjusted and adapted to be suitable. The main thing to consider is that horses with laminitis can be in pain in spite of treatment, and owners need to be aware of how long they are prepared to allow their animal to go through this, as well as how much they are prepared to spend on the treatment of their laminitic patients.

Most horses with long-term laminitis have persistent pain and lameness. The most difficult horses to manage might have one or more of the following problems;

- rotation or sinking of the pedal bone within the hoof
- the solar area of the hoof penetrating the foot
- infections of the pedal bone
- contraction of the joints and tendinous structures of the distal limb.

Typically, a horse with laminitis will be sore 24-48 hours after the disease started. If the horse has been very active or owners have been persisting to try and move the animal in this initial period, more destruction of the attachment between the hoof and pedal bone is likely to result.

Once assessed by your vet, several tests may have to be considered including blood tests to look for predisposing factors (Cushings disease and Type 2 diabetes) and x-rays to determine the degree of disruption within the foot.

It can be really difficult to determine the precise cause of laminitis and whilst many horses develop laminitis without any apparent reason, very frequently overeating and a previous history of obesity is involved.

Since by the time the horse is showing signs of laminitis a lot of the changes and damage in the foot has already occurred, the horse needs to be stabilised and treated for a disease which has already caused a lot of destruction. This is similar to people who have had damage to the heart muscle after a heart attack. It is known that not everything can be put back in its original state, no matter what treatment can be carried out.

Strangely, the sorest horses when the disease is first detected are not always the ones which have the most severe damage within the foot, therefore it will be impossible until sometime into the disease for your vet to start giving an exact percentage of chance of recovery. In fact, some horses will need ongoing treatment for the rest of their lives (veterinary care, corrective farriery, turnout in areas with soft footing, and ongoing treatment for underlying conditions).

Even in cases where there is an initial good response to treatment, further attacks of laminitis and other foot problems can occur, and lameness may develop much later on and be very difficult to treat. At the very outset, owners should carefully consider that treating laminitis can be extremely costly, and that treatment cannot be guaranteed to work, nor will there be 100% agreement between different therapists about which is the best option for any horse. The best clinicians will actually vary their treatment according to the case in front of them, and occasionally may have to switch between different treatments options in order to get the best outcome.

The most important aspect of being confronted with a horse with laminitis is that the owners have to understand very early on that this disease is severely painful and may go on for some time. They may have to consider whether it is in the interest of their horses to put them through the treatment of laminitis. Of course, euthanasia is a subjective judgement and different owners will make different decisions. It is however very important to discuss this most ultimate option early on with your vet so that everyone knows which parameters to work within.

In summary, horses suffering from laminitis need to be assessed urgently to receive the right medication. Early on, discussions must be had about horse welfare and treatment options. Your vet can give no guarantees that treatment will work and they may have to change treatment tack on several occasions during the regime to give the best chance of success.

