

ESSEX HORSE & PONY PROTECTION SOCIETY

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LAMINITIS

What is it?

Damage to the sensitive structures (laminae) which support the bones within the hoof. The whole body weight of the horse is supported by the laminae. Damage is caused when the blood supply to the sensitive laminae is disturbed, depriving them of oxygen and nutrients, resulting in first stage (or acute) laminitis. The damage caused by laminitis cannot be reversed, although prompt action can result in stabilisation of the hoof structures. Laminitis is an extremely serious and painful condition requiring urgent veterinary attention. It can affect any type or age of horse or pony and if unchecked can lead to death. Laminitis does not only affect the front feet. It can affect any of the four feet in any combination.

Causes include:

- Obesity (often linked to Equine Metabolic syndrome)
- Cushing's disease
- Sudden excessive sugars in diet (eg spring grass or cereals)
- Poor hoof care
- Retained placenta after foaling
- Steroids
- Concussion to foot (eg roadwork and/or lameness in opposite limb)
- Stress
- Pneumonia
- Colic

Signs of laminitis:

Warning signs

- "Pottery" gait.
- Walking carefully over uneven or stony ground.

These signs can sometimes be mistaken for "stiffness" or "a touch of arthritis". If in any doubt, call the vet to get a proper diagnosis.

Signs of an acute attack

- Standing with hind feet underneath and front feet extended out in front.
- Unwilling to move or pick up feet.
- Difficulty turning.
- Shifting from one foot to another.
- Throbbing digital pulse.
- Increased heart rate.
- Sweating.
- Lying down.

What to do

If you see any of the above signs, call the vet immediately. DO NOT “see how it goes” or “ask the farrier next time he comes”. Prompt action will limit the damage caused and could save the pony’s life.

- Phone the vet.
- Remove from grass if attack occurs in the field and transfer to a deep bed (eg shavings).
- Do not force a laminitic pony to walk as this will cause further damage. Use a trailer if necessary.
- The vet will administer anti-inflammatory medication to reduce pain and swelling and prevent further damage and, if appropriate, will arrange X-rays and blood tests.
- Do not exercise during the acute stage.
- Follow the advice of the vet and not the advice of well-meaning onlookers.

Prevention

- Ask your vet whether testing for Cushing’s disease and/or Equine Metabolic Syndrome is indicated.
- Control your pony’s weight (see below).
- Avoid turnout on lush grass, especially ryegrasses and clover.
- Do not turn horses out onto newly fertilised fields. Fertiliser will stimulate the grass to grow, increasing the sugar content dramatically.
- Do not feed cereals or molasses to susceptible ponies.
- Use a grazing muzzle to reduce grass intake and/or strip graze on sparse grazing.
- Exercise on a regular basis (but NOT during a laminitic attack).
- Consider turning out at night and bringing in during the day. Sunshine = high levels of sugar in the grass.
- Turn ponies at risk out together. Do not turn out alone as this will cause stress and could trigger laminitis.
- Do not turn out on frosted grass.
- Do not starve. Feed little and often.
- Check the pony’s crest. If it hardens, take off the grass and feed soaked hay.
- Check digital pulse daily (eg at the same time as picking out feet).

Weight control

You should be able to feel your pony’s ribs and his crest should feel soft. There should not be any excessive fat pads. When viewed from behind, the spine should be just prominent or level with the quarters. There should not be a dip or gully along the back.

- Monitor weight weekly with weigh tape or weighbridge.
- Weigh all rations using scales or spring balance.
- Restrict grazing – strip graze/use muzzle/restrict time out.
- Soak the hay to reduce the sugar content.
- Consult an equine nutritionist regarding a suitable diet. This is a free service offered by most of the major feed companies.
- Allow ponies to lose a little weight during the winter, as they would do in the wild.
- Only rug when necessary.
- Exercise regularly.
- Limit titbits – apples and carrots contain sugar!