



What Is a Hoof Abscess?

A hoof abscess is a localized accumulation of pus within the horse's hoof. It can occur in any part of the foot and typically results from a bacterial infection entering through a break in the hoof's protective barrier. This could be a puncture wound, a crack, or even a poorly trimmed hoof that leads to a piece of debris getting lodged in the sole. The horse's body walls off the infection, resulting in the formation of an abscess. The accumulation of pus creates pressure, and as the abscess grows, this pressure causes the horse significant pain.



Clinical Signs

Sudden and severe lameness is the most common clinical sign of a hoof abscess. Other signs include:

- Refusal to bear weight on the affected limb.
- Heat in the hoof.
- An increased digital pulse in the fetlock artery.
- Swelling and tenderness around the coronary band and pastern.
- A tract draining pus from the sole or coronary band.
- Pain when you apply pressure to the sole of the foot, indicating the general area of the abscess.

Lameness severity can vary by individual

horse and the location and extent of the abscess. In some cases, the abscess might rupture quickly and naturally, giving the horse relief before you even notice the issue.



Diagnosis

Your veterinarian should examine your horse's hoof to rule out other causes of severe lameness, such as fractures. He or she will then use hoof testers to identify an abscess—the horse will react when the hoof testers put pressure on the exact area of pain. Your veterinarian might look for signs of hoof injury, such as a contaminated hoof crack, and investigate any points of increased sensitivity to confirm the diagnosis. If the abscess location is difficult to pinpoint, he or she might need to take radiographs (X-rays).



Treatment and Management

Treatment for a hoof abscess aims to relieve the pressure, drain the accumulated pus, and resolve the infection. This often starts by soaking the horse's hoof in warm water and Epsom salts, which can help draw out the pus and provide pain relief. Some abscesses rupture on their own, but most require veterinary intervention to open and drain the infected tract using

a paring knife.

After the abscess has ruptured, your veterinarian will apply an antiseptic bandage beneath a waterproof covering, such as a hoof boot, to encourage draining for the next 48 hours. If your veterinarian is concerned about systemic infection or if the abscess was severe, he or she might prescribe antibiotics.

While the abscess heals, keep the foot clean and dry, which might require stall rest and/or bandaging the hoof for several days to weeks, depending on its severity. Change the bandage daily until drainage stops, the tract is dry, and your horse is sound.



When to Call Your Vet

Contact your veterinarian:

- As soon as you notice signs of lameness that don't resolve quickly.
- If drainage continues for more than 48 hours.
- If the abscess doesn't improve progressively and daily after drainage.
- If proud flesh develops around the abscess hole.
- If your horse develops chronic or recurring abscesses.

Hoof abscesses are painful and can have complications if not managed properly. Your vet can guide you through the best course of action and determine if your horse needs additional care.