

Hoof Care: Importance of Proper Trimming and Shoeing Intervals



Farrier working on a horse's hooves. Philip Eckerberg

As a horse owner, you are the person most responsible for the health and welfare of your horse and its daily care, and this includes care of the feet. Perhaps you do your own trimming (and a few owners also do their own shoeing), or like most owners hire a professional farrier to come periodically to trim or shoe.

Even though your farrier may come to trim/shoe every 5 to 8 weeks or so - the frequency depending on your horse's specific needs and how quickly his feet grow, and whether he is being reshod or just trimmed - the horse depends on you to monitor and care for his feet in between farrier visits.

Keeping track of hoof health and growth helps prevent problems and also alerts you when the farrier needs to see the horse sooner than the next scheduled visit.

The horse's hoof wall grows about one-quarter to three-eighths inch per month, growing down from the horn-producing cells at the coronary band. The entire hoof wall is usually replaced by

new horn every eight to twelve months (and by that time all the old horn, including defects and cracks, will be replaced), though some horses have a slower or faster rate of hoof growth.

If a horse is shod, the shoes prevent any wear on the feet. They may need to be reset (if they are not too badly worn) or replaced with new shoes (after proper hoof trimming) every four to fourteen weeks, with six to ten weeks being average--depending on rate of hoof growth and whether the feet are properly balanced at the time of trimming/shoeing.

If a horse's feet grow fast and the foot is out of balance, the toes may become too long in just three to four weeks after trimming/shoeing, with more risk for stumbling. Other individuals can easily go two months or longer (especially if the feet are balanced and the horse has good conformation and isn't prone to tripping or stumbling) before needing to be reshod - unless the shoes wear out faster or come loose.

Keep in mind, however, that if the feet are allowed to grow too long the hoof wall may start to grow down around the shoe at the heels, putting pressure on the sole at the bars, which might lead to corns or bruising.

There will also be more strain on joints and the support structures such as tendons or ligaments. If the horse is barefoot there will be more forces on the hoof wall (which could lead to splits and cracks, or stretching/opening at the white line).

In a too-long foot there is also more chance for hoof diseases like thrush or [white line disease](#).

If shoes are left on too long they may become loose. Nails heads may wear off. A loose shoe can be a hazard if it slips out of place and the horse bangs himself with the shoe or protruding nails.

Always check the feet and clean them out on a regular basis, even if they don't need be trimmed or reshod yet, to make sure there are no problems developing.

[Thrush](#) is unmistakable grimy black secretions in the clefts of the frog, with a bad odor.

[White line disease](#) is more obscure, with pathogens entering at the white line if there is a bit of separation when the horse puts weight on the foot, especially a bare foot without a shoe to protect it. The horn-eating pathogens hollow out an ever-upward-extending area between the outer hoof wall and the inner tissues, and this hollow area may not be visible on casual inspection.

Under natural conditions in big pastures with varied terrain and footing (such as horses running free on rangelands) bare feet wear down about the same rate they grow; hoof growth compensates for wear and the feet stay about the proper length without the need for trimming.

If a horse is being ridden however, traveling more miles, the bare feet may wear faster than they grow and the horse will need shoes.

The trimming intervals for a barefoot horse kept in a smaller pasture or pen, or in a stall with limited turnout, may vary greatly, depending on whether the horse is on soft footing that doesn't wear away the hoof horn, or abrasive footing like gravel or rocky ground.

A horse on soft ground or wet pasture may need frequent trimming because there is very little wear to remove the natural hoof growth. How much you ride the horse will make a difference.

A barefoot horse being ridden frequently or traveling around in a rocky pasture may have so much wear that the feet won't need to be trimmed at all, except to occasionally smooth the bottom edges to keep them from breaking and chipping. This is something you can usually do yourself, if you have a good rasp.

Keeping the edges smooth will help prevent breaking or cracking. If the edge gets chipped or a crack starts, frequent smoothing can help prevent further breaking or keep a crack from continuing on up the hoof wall.

If the horse is ridden very much on hard ground or gravel roads or pavement he will wear the feet faster than they can grow and he may need shoes after just a few rides. Some horses have harder, tougher feet than others and can go a long time without shoes, while other horses tend to break/chip their hoof walls or stone bruise if you ride them on rocky ground.;

Many horses are better off wearing shoes if you ride them, only going barefoot during layoffs or during wintertime when you aren't riding.

With flat-footed horses or those with fragile hoof horn, it's usually best to shoe them before you start riding again in the spring, to keep them from becoming tender or lame.

You and your farrier can determine the appropriate schedule and timing for trimming and shoeing your horses. The biggest challenge is getting the timing right if you have multiple horses with different rates of hoof growth.

It's handiest for your farrier to do them all at the same time, on a certain schedule, but this may mean one horse's feet grow too long between farrier visits or another horse isn't quite ready yet for the next trimming/shoeing because his feet haven't grown very much since the last trimming/shoeing.

These are things you and your farrier must work out and it may mean more frequent farrier visits to time the foot work most appropriately for each horse.

About the Author

Heather Smith Thomas



Heather Smith Thomas has raised and trained horses for 58 years and has been writing about them nearly that long. She got her first horse at age 9 and began raising horses of her own while in high school, using them in 4-H and to help with cattle work on her parents' ranch.

She began writing horse stories for children's magazines and horse care articles for equine publications to help pay her way through college (University of Puget Sound), and has sold more than 10,000 stories and articles and published 24 books. Her first book, *A horse in Your Life: A Guide for the New Owner*, was written during the summer between her sophomore and junior year of college and published by A.S. Barnes & Company in 1966.

Most of her magazine articles deal with health care, breeding, training, horse behavior/handling or veterinary topics (horses and cattle). She and her husband raise beef cattle and a few horses on a ranch in the mountains of eastern Idaho, where they use their horses for cattle work.

What began as an expression of interest and love of horses (freelance writing) soon became a way to help pay the bills on a struggling family ranch; her writing became the equivalent of an "off farm job" that could be done at home at odd hours between riding range to check on cattle, delivering calves, etc.

Heather rarely leaves the ranch--staying home to take care of "critters" has been a way of life. After selling some of the cow herd to her son and his family, her part time writing job has become more full time. She now writes regularly for more than 25 farm and livestock magazines and about 30 horse publications,

Recent books include *Storey's Guide to Raising Horses*, *Storey's Guide to Training Horses*, *The Horse Conformation Handbook*, *Stable Smarts*, *Beyond the Flames—A Family Touched by Fire*, *Care and Management of Horses*, *Understanding Equine Hoof Care*, *Good Horse-Bad Habits*, *Essential Guide to Calving*, and *Cattle Health Handbook*.

Heather's most recent books include *Horse Tales: True Stories from an Idaho Ranch*, a compilation of horse stories telling about some of the interesting and challenging horses in her life. *Cow Tales; More True Stories from an Idaho Ranch*, and *Ranch Tales: Stories of Dogs, Cats and Other Crazy Critters*. Most of her books and articles deal with horses or cattle health care,

breeding, or handling. Her goal has been to learn all she can about care and handling of horses and cattle and to share these experiences with her readers.

These days, she enjoys riding with her youngest grandchildren who live on the ranch are now ages 14 through 17. She has also appreciated the help of her oldest granddaughter (Heather Carrie Thomas) who graduated from Carroll College and is now married and living on a farm in Saskatchewan. "Grandma Heather" enjoys the special times with her grandchildren who share her love of horses.