

The Equine Lameness Exam- What to expect.

Lameness is an often complicated and frustrating condition in the horse with many potential causes. When lameness occurs, you should contact your veterinarian promptly, as early examination can save you time, money, and may prevent further damage to your horse. The goal of such early examinations is to keep small problems from becoming big ones. Your veterinarian will include the three following essential features during your horse's lameness exam:

Passive Examination

- Medical History- Your veterinarian will ask you questions relating to present and past difficulties of the horse. He or she may also inquire about diet, turnout schedule, exercise and work requirements, and the temperament of your horse.
- Visual Appraisal- Your veterinarian will evaluate your horse's conformation, balance and how he or she bears their weight.
- Hands-On Exam- Your veterinarian will palpate (feel) your horse. He or she will check muscles, joints, bones and tendons for evidence of pain, heat, swelling or any other physical abnormalities. He or she may flex joints and/or apply pressure to certain areas to check for pain.
- Hoof Examination- Your veterinarian will apply hoof testers to the feet. This procedure evaluates for undue sensitivity or pain within the hoof.

Active Examination (Evaluation of the horse in motion)

- Gait Evaluation- Your veterinarian will watch your horse walk and trot on different ground surfaces (hard and soft). He or she may evaluate the horse from the front, back, and side. He or she may also have the horse trot in circles.
- Flexion Tests- Your veterinarian will hold your horse's limbs in a flexed position. After a period of time, he or she will release the leg and watch the horse trot away. He or she will watch for signs of pain and note any weight shifting or irregular movement.

Diagnostic Tests

- Once your veterinarian has isolated a general location of lameness through passive and active examination, diagnostic procedures are often necessary to pinpoint a specific location and cause.
- Diagnostic nerve and joint blocks- Your veterinarian will temporarily deaden the sensation to specific segments of the limb until the lameness disappears. This will isolate the area of pain causing the lameness.
- Radiographs- X-rays are useful in identifying damage or changes to bony tissues.
- Ultrasound- This procedure uses ultrasonic waves to image internal structures. It complements radiographs by allowing evaluation of soft tissue structures (tendons/ligaments).

Lameness is a complicated condition with many possible causes. You, the owner, must be a conscientious observer at all times. If you suspect a problem, discontinue riding your horse and seek advice from your veterinarian. By identifying even minor lameness and acting swiftly to correct it, you will minimize the risk of injury to the horse and yourself, and you will be rewarded by better performance and longer, more useful life from your horse.