

Horse owners have recently shared their frustrations with me concerning their horses' chipped unshod hooves. While unsightly, the owner's deeper concern lies with compromising potential soundness. If one foot chips and breaks away prematurely, that foot will be uneven from its mate. Feet can also be uneven due to the combination of poor conformation and excessive chipping. Regular hoof care tries to ensure that proper hoof balance is restored and maintained.

Owners have felt that one of the causes for the excessive chipping could be from having dry, brittle feet. They are quick to apply moisturizers to the hooves. Dry feet are usually not the case at all. We live in a climate here in Ohio that promotes proper hoof moisture without having feet that are neither too wet nor too dry. There can be several reasons why excessive chipping occurs. Many of these causes can happen simultaneously, while for other horses, the cause may be singular.

One of the biggest contributing factors this time of year is fly stomping. We are clearly into the height of fly season, with only the species changing with the turn of the calendar. You may want to consider the length of time that the horse is turned out, as well as the time of day. Night turn out with proper fencing avoids pests as well as preserving your horses show coat from harmful UV rays. Daytime turn out should include a quality fly spray at the very least. Further fly control measures include fly masks, fly sheets (which can even include neck protection) and leg protectors. Greater measures vary from fans, barn spraying systems, feed through supplements, fly catchers and insects that interrupt the life cycle of the fly.

Owners and I have also been talking a lot about the current hardness of the ground. Coming off of one of the wettest springs in history, our feet did get on the moist side. Once the water spigot was turned off, the ground became hard and rugged. Studies done on wild horses have revealed that the feet in the driest climates are the shortest and most eroded, compared to less harsher climates. There is some comparison worth noting for our domestic horses, although it does not allow for horses in the same group to show different rates of hoof chipping. The better explanation simply boils down to genetics. Some horses do poorly barefoot depending on the ground that they are exposed to. Shoeing may need to be implemented for those individuals whose feet cannot tolerate hard ground. These horses will have feet that appear to be too short as compared to the length of the pastern. There is little weight bearing wall resulting in too much sole pressure. These horses also exhibit soreness when exercised.

The rate of hoof growth can contribute to excessive chipping. During the winter time, growth slows mostly due to ambient air temperature. When air temperature drops, circulation slows in the extremities in an effort to keep the body warm. This is why we employ mittens and heavy boots to keep our fingers and toes warm when we brave cold temperatures outside. In the summertime, warmer temperatures encourage full body circulation, as the body shifts to cooling mode. Increased blood flow stimulates the tissues resulting in hoof growth. Exercise can also increase circulation, regardless of the season. Most of us though, have a greater tendency to use our horses more in milder temperatures than struggle in the cold. The increased growth encourages chipping as feet increase in length. This is Mother Nature's way of trying to trim the hoof to a more normal length.

It is common in the summer to shorten the length of time between farrier visits. My horses generally decrease their interval by two weeks throughout the summer. This helps keep the shape of the feet more consistent. Even if on a regular schedule, your farrier should be informed if you are concerned about the condition of your horses' hooves.

The aggressiveness of the trim being performed can affect how much chipping occurs between farrier visits. Whether you choose to hire a barefoot trimmer or a farrier, there are many different trimming styles that are implemented. Proper foot care should take into consideration many factors and therefore the trimming modality can be altered to fit the circumstances. Some horses tolerate a more aggressive trim, while others do not. No horse should be sore after trimming or shoeing.

Some chipping can be considered to be within normal parameters of a healthy foot. Excessive chipping can however have several health concerns. Feet that have too little hoof wall leave the sole bearing too much weight. This can cause sole bruising and potential abscessing. Furthermore, if the sole is thin, the coffin bone inside the foot is more prone to increased concussive forces. It is also possible if the foot is left too long, for the hoof to break off into sensitive tissue.

Another concern is the possibility of white line disease. A hoof wall that has the opportunity to stretch and break away from the white line provides the perfect opportunity for this infection to begin. This most commonly occurs at the toe if the foot is left too long, but can also occur in the quarters, along the sides of the hoof, where flares are more likely. This is why reducing forward flares and flares caused by conformation are important every time the horse is trimmed as well as reducing the likelihood of chipping.

Communication between you and your hoof care professional is essential for your horses' optimum hoof health. Ask questions and get involved with the care of your horses hooves. The more observant that you become, the easier it will be to spot a potential problem and get it resolved. By working together you can find out the cause of the excessive chipping and the best way to resolve it.

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