

My Horse Stepped on A Nail!

By Marie Bartling, DVM

Inevitably, as horse owners, we will all experience the terrifying sensation when your horse becomes acutely lame. Your worst fears are realized when you raise the foot, there it is ... a nail in the bottom of the foot. The following article is written as brief guidelines for the initial treatment by the owner after this occurs.

Several things are important to note before calling your veterinarian:

1. Where in the foot is the nail?
2. How big/long do you estimate the nail to be?
3. How sore is your horse?
4. Has your horse had a tetanus shot within the last 3-6 months?

The sole of the foot is between 5mm and 25mm thick around the toe. The soft tissues of the frog can be as thick as 2-3 cm. The most worrisome area of penetration includes the middle section of the frog and the sulci of the frog in the back half of the foot. The deep digital flexor tendon lies beneath this area within a tendon sheath. If the flexor tendon or its sheath is penetrated, it is very difficult to treat and rid the area of infection. In fact, cases like these are considered life threatening.

In any situation involving a nail, you should contact your veterinarian for advice and possible treatment options. If the nail is short, as a nail from a horse shoe might be, and has punctured the sole with little lameness, it may be advisable to monitor the horse, soak the foot in betadine for a few days. These horses will sometimes develop a sole abscess resulting in marked lameness after a few days, in which case further treatment is indicated.

If a single nail penetrates deep into the foot, it is advised not to pull it out. Keep the horse quiet and prevent them from walking on it while you call your veterinarian out, or prepare to trailer the horse in. The reason for this is that the nail will be easily seen on an x-ray and will give a better idea of the potential endangered structures. If the nail has been pulled, contrast material can be injected into the area, but the ability to appreciate endangered structures is reduced and may make determining prognosis difficult.

In any case, it is important to consider a nail as a potential risk factor for infection and to note the vaccination status of your horse. Treatment options can be further discussed with your veterinarian, when the time comes.