

Ask A Vet: Lush Rapid Growth of Pastures Causing Founder in Horses

Saturday, May 6, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Every spring one of my horses gets sore feet when grazing on the horse pasture. I end up having to put him in a dry lot and feeding him hay to keep him from getting too fat and foundering on pasture. How serious is his lameness and how can I avoid having to lock him off the pasture?

-Easy Keepers Owner

Dear Reader,

Your horse is like many in our area that suffer from grass founder. Every spring when the grass grows rapidly and becomes lush we are called to treat laminitis in horses like yours. Most horses that easily grass founder are overweight and have a cresty neck that bows with stored fat. They have metabolic syndrome which is a 75 cent word that boils down to being too doggone fat. These horses are easy keepers and are often insulin insensitive among other problems that most of the time stems from the weight problem. Horses have a unique anatomy in that they support their entire weight on a single fingernail on each foot. The last bone in each foot or coffin bone is bound to the hoof by tiny fingerlike laminae that lock into the grooves inside the hoof wall. When these laminae become sore and inflamed the horses feet hurt and the horse is said to have laminitis or founder. There are many causes of founder that range from getting into the grain supply and overeating, grazing lush fast growing forage, to concussion of the feet on a hard surface road founder. Severe untreated overload of grain can result in acute laminitis that can completely detach the Velcro like laminae that binds the coffin bone to the hoof wall. The bone is then driven by the weight of the horse through the bottom of the foot - often resulting in the humane destruction of the horse. Immediate veterinary care upon discovery of acute founder can prevent this tragedy from occurring.

Grass founder accounts for over 50% of all laminitis especially in our area. Our pastures grow rapidly and lush every spring and even after a rainy spell following a drought later in the summer or fall. Easy keeping, overweight, heavy cresty necked horses can founder on lush grass as easily as if they overloaded on grain. This is due to the passage of undigested fermented forages from the foregut into the large intestines. This rapidly fermenting forage in the large intestines restricts the flow of oxygen and nutrients in the blood and starts damaging the laminae structure in the hooves.

As you can understand grass founder is a serious lameness and you need to take steps to prevent it from occurring. Never turn a hungry horse out on lush pasture, have the horse full of dry hay and then limit the grazing to a couple hours a day until the horse can adapt to the rich forage. My horses are pastured year round I have little time to restrict their grazing by putting them in a dry lot and feeding them hay. By early May I put grazing muzzles on two of them that tend to get too fat and start to get sore feet. These grazing muzzles are wonderful for my situation as they significantly restrict the amount of grass the horse can consume and I can leave them on pasture. The muzzles also help reduce the weight of the horses gradually and I can usually remove the muzzles once the pastures stop the lush growth period. Contact your veterinarian at the first sign of founder from any origin.

-Dr. Jerry Sellon