



Down on the Farm

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Occasionally, a horse will develop a crack in the hoof wall—from splitting and chipping or excessive concussion forces on the foot or injury. Barefoot horses often develop cracks, but these are usually not serious unless neglected. In a long foot, cracks can become worse quickly, traveling up into sensitive tissues. A deep crack may make the horse lame.

Brittle feet, caused by dry conditions, nutrition or genetics, make a horse more prone to cracks. Brittleness is more common in white hoofs than dark ones, but this depends on the individual. Some horses have tough, resilient feet, regardless of color.

Toe cracks, quarter cracks and heel cracks start in the hoof wall at the ground surface, usually from a chip or split in a long hoof, and travel upward. Sometimes a crack starts in the heel or quarter area and travels horizontally around the foot, due to weakness in the hoof wall from a blow or injury—as when a horse strikes the hoof against a rock. Sometimes a crack will start at the coronary band and travel downward, due to weakness in the hoof wall at that area.

Thin hoof walls make a horse more susceptible to cracks; the hoof is more easily chipped when traveling on uneven ground, and more easily broken. Feet with thin walls also wear quickly if the horse is barefoot.

Barefoot horses with hoof cracks must be trimmed often to relieve pressure on the crack and keep it from splitting more. It can be difficult to grow out a crack on a barefoot horse; it may be impossible to take all the pressure off the crack and keep it from spreading. The horse may need to be shod to grow out the crack.

When trimming a cracked hoof, the wall at the crack should be cut away so it doesn't bear weight and expand. For a toe crack, the toe should be trimmed on each side of the crack. For a heel or quarter crack, the hoof wall at the heel should be trimmed from the crack to the back of the wall, so the heel and quarter will not take weight; the crack cannot spread apart and split more. The progress of a crack can often be halted by rasping a small notch across its highest point. This helps stop the splitting, for it distributes the force and pressure along the notched groove instead of on up the hoof wall.

A hoof crack that originates in the coronary band because of an old injury can be a persistent problem. Corrective shoeing may be necessary for the rest of the horse's life because the defect in the coronary band causes weak and distorted hoof growth. Regular use of hoof dressing can help keep the coronary band and hoof wall more pliable in that area, and less apt to crack.

Hoof Cracks

A shoe can help keep stress off the hoof wall at the area of the crack, and keep it from splitting farther. It helps to put a clip on each side of the crack to keep the hoof wall from expanding when weight is placed on the foot. When the foot is being prepared for the shoe, a portion of the hoof wall at the site of the crack should be trimmed away so it can't bear weight. Thus the weight can be distributed along the rest of the shoe, not at the crack. This allows the hoof wall to grow out without widening the crack and sending it on up the hoof.

Your veterinarian or farrier may suggest other methods for severe cracks. Some can be repaired with a strong, fast-drying glue or plastic that holds the cracked area together and fills the space, so sensitive tissues underneath are protected from risk of infection. Even with glue or plastic filler, the foot must still be trimmed often, or the shoe reset, until the crack has grown out. The glue may have to be reapplied several times.

A serious crack should have immediate attention, not only to halt the progress of the crack, but also to protect underlying tissues from infection. If the crack penetrates into sensitive tissues, infection and lameness may result. The abscess would have to be treated, and the horse given a tetanus shot if boosters are not up to date. The horse might need antibiotics and daily soaking of the foot. If a horse develops lameness in conjunction with a hoof crack, consult your veterinarian. 🐾

