



By Geri White

Neglected and overgrown hooves are some of the most common pathologies I encounter in newly arrived rescue horses, and horses purchased at auction. By definition, pathology is "the science of the causes and effects of diseases". I consider troubled hooves pathology because the problem has both cause and effect. For example, thrush, wall cracks and a stretched white line all compromise the health of the hoof, and the horse as a whole. So what happens when the hoof wall overgrows? How can it affect your horse? And what can you do about it?

The pictures below show examples of extreme cases. Fortunately, I don't see them too often. For each horse, walking was compensatory and painful. Holding up any one hoof to trim was difficult. I used a saw on some of them, with the horses' feet on the ground. In cases like these, some hooves became overgrown because no one worked with the horses to pick up their feet for trimming. Other horses had clearly lost their trust in humans due to unkind or disrespectful past experiences. This is common among horses arriving at rescues. It's my belief that the horse, the caregiver and I must work as a team, developing an approach that builds trust, and paves the way to a healthy horse and hoof.



SEVERE CASES OF OVERGROWN HOOVES REQUIRE A VETERINARIAN

I make it a point to work with a veterinarian in the beginning, especially with extreme cases. We start with radiographs to assess the distal bones for alignment, possible damage, and any limitations so we can set realistic expectations. Often, we need to use sedation, so we can trim the bulk of the overgrown hoof material. My goal is to use sedation minimally, yet ensure the horse feels safe and protected. I use only what's required to get the initial job done, and reduce the amount each time until we no longer need it. We are all working to create the best experience possible for the horse, and often by the fourth trim or sooner, he no longer needs sedation. I visit these horses every two weeks. Between visits, I encourage caregivers to continue to work on building trust and handling the horse's feet every day.

COMFORT AND CALM YOUR HORSE

During hoof treatments, I also use various essential oils, and look for the horse's feedback on which one she likes best (lavender is the most common). I associate the oil's scent with good experiences and bring it with me to every visit. To further make the experience a positive one, I always take my time with the horse, releasing her hoof when she asks. I also use photonic light therapy on acupuncture points to calm and relieve pain. It doesn't take long for a horse to know when you are really listening to her. I work slowly and within the horse's comfort zone. Sometimes, we don't accomplish everything we intended during a session. If the horse says, "I'm finished today", then we are finished today. I have found that when I honor that decision, and return two weeks later, the horse will allow me to handle her for longer, become more communicative, and allow me to begin building a bond that will last for the duration of our course of treatment, and beyond.

HOOF HEALTH AFFECTS THE ENTIRE BODY

Rehabilitating severely overgrown hooves requires a serious and committed caregiver. From a holistic viewpoint, the whole body is in trouble. When hooves become overgrown, it alters the biomechanics of the entire body, causing arthritis, bone loss, muscle and soft tissue atrophy. When I see horses for the first time, I have already reviewed an information sheet I emailed to the caregiver to fill out in advance, providing a detailed history of the horse. I look at the entire horse during my assessment, checking for imbalances in the body, especially in the face, head and teeth. Once I have a more complete story, I can create a customized action plan appropriate to the horse that is also within the means of the caregiver. See the sidebar about Levi (on page 32) for an example.

Continued on page 32.

Continued from page 31.

DEDICATION IS KEY TO HOOF REHABILITATION

Hoof overgrowth has serious body, mind and emotional consequences for your horse. Rehabilitating these horses is very rewarding, but can also be costly and time-consuming. You must be serious, dedicated and willing to work with a team of professionals who are passionate in their fields of expertise. To get the best results possible, this team may include practitioners of other modalities, so try to keep your mind open.

Horses spend nearly their entire lives standing, walking and running on the four feet they were born with. Far too many horses are euthanized due to lameness problems that were not their fault. Let's make sure our equine friends enjoy feet of comfort, not pain; feet of health, not sickness; and feet that grow from a healthy mind, body and spirit – these are the feet that will carry our horses through a happy life. 🐾

Geri White has an Equine Sciences Degree and Natural Hoof Care Certification and is a Field Instructor for the Equine Sciences Academy. She is a Certified Hoof Care Professional with the American Hoof Association, and currently serves as President.

CASE STUDY: LEVI

Let's look at one of my previous cases involving a horse named Levi. His veterinarian had recommended euthanasia due to his longstanding lameness, but his caregivers were three women who weren't ready to give up. They contacted me to help with a holistic hoof care approach.

Levi's toes were very long and his heels were underrun. He walked like a robot up front. His cervical trapezius muscles were overdeveloped and very sore. His teeth were unbalanced.

We examined Levi's feed and supplements and made some changes. We fit him with boots and pads and arranged for alternative therapies, including chiropractic, acupuncture and massage. The most important parts of his treatment were daily exercise such as hand-walking, and the care the women gave him. He was on a four-week trim cycle so we could sustain all his biomechanical improvements.



Photos courtesy of Ceri White

Levi's progress in less than a year.

Levi's caregivers and I made an excellent team that functioned harmoniously and in tandem. Eventually, Levi could be comfortably ridden on trails with padded hoof boots, three times a week.