

# Can Horses Go Barefoot? To Shoe or Not to Shoe – A Common Question

By Heather Smith Thomas

A growing number of horses today are staying barefoot as owners realize that unshod feet can be healthier than having shoes on all the time. Some horses are being ridden with hoof boots, but many are ridden barefoot and are able to withstand the stresses that we used to think could only be handled with shoes.

Some of the advantages of going barefoot include better traction and less slipping on certain types of footing, and also the fact that horse owners are often able to do their own hoof care once they learn how to maintain the barefoot trim. The

natural bare hoof, trimmed by normal wear in a normal environment (dry and rocky rather than soft, wet footing) with adequate exercise, keeps the foot balanced and growing evenly. The coffin bone is at a proper angle to the ground.

Not all horses can go barefoot, however. To know whether your horse is a good candidate for leaving shoes off, consider several important factors. These include weather/climate (since moist conditions make feet softer and a dry climate makes them harder), footing issues (whether the horse lives on soft footing or a rocky pasture), use of the horse (what type of riding you do) and his individual foot conformation.

To keep equine feet "natural" and healthy and strong while barefoot, the horse's environment and lifestyle must also be kept more natural. Barefoot life won't work for a horse that lives in a stall or small pen, a soft grassy pasture or wet conditions, especially if you ride on gravel roads or rocky terrain. He'll quickly get tenderfooted or go lame from stone bruising. A horse that lives in a stall or small pen with soft bedding or dirt underfoot is unable to get enough daily exercise on rocky ground to keep his feet strong and tough.

To be ridden without shoes, the horse's feet must toughen naturally by living in the same terrain you'd be riding him in. If he's in



This 20 year old gelding has strong feet—with great structural integrity. He was able to withstand a summer's riding, carrying this small child (Emily Daine) on many rides, without shoes.

average riding stresses without shoes. But if you take these horses to a wetter climate, their feet become softer. Conversely, you can take a soft-footed eastern horse to a drier climate and turn him out on rocky footing and his feet will become harder.

The horse's use will also be a major determining factor regarding whether or not he can go barefoot. A horse doing hard work every day in rocky terrain can't withstand these stresses without shoes unless he lives in this environment and his feet are very tough. Even then, if he's

ridden daily in the rocks for long distances (endurance riding, working cattle) he'll wear his feet faster than they grow and will eventually need shoes. If he competes in certain types of sports where a special kind of traction is needed, he may also need shoes.

The final factor on whether a horse can go barefoot is his individual hoof strength and structure. Some horses have better feet than others, regardless of their environment. Hoof capsule strength and integrity is partly due to genetics. Proper nutrition can help some poor-footed horses grow stronger feet, but other individuals always have shelly, thin hoof walls and soles. They cannot withstand the stresses of athletic work without shoes. Some horses with hoof problems need shoes even if they aren't ridden—to protect the unhealthy feet and help hold their shape and integrity.

One option for owners who want to keep their horse's feet "natural" and barefoot is to use hoof boots when riding. If you don't have ideal conditions for your horse's feet and they cannot stay tough enough for barefoot riding, there are several types of commercial hoof boots available that can be put on for riding and taken off again when you get home. These can keep the horse's feet from bruising or becoming painfully tender.



Some horses with soft, shelly or crumbly hooves that crack readily are not good candidates for going barefoot.

a dry climate and lives in a big rocky pasture where soil is decomposed granite, he'll have feet like steel. If he's in a soft, wet pasture or a wet climate, his hooves will be soft and wear away very quickly if you ride on rocky ground.

Wild horses gathered from public lands in the arid West can usually handle the

# Making the Transition from Shod to Barefoot

By Heather Smith Thomas

If your horse has always had shoes during riding season and you decide to keep him barefoot—after determining he might be a good candidate to go barefoot—there are several things you can do to help him make this transition. First of all, plan ahead, since it takes time to toughen his feet after wearing shoes.

If you generally have the shoes pulled off in late fall to let the horse go barefoot through his winter “vacation” from riding, it’s not too difficult to transition into staying barefoot in the spring—since the horse’s feet have had all winter to toughen up. They may just need a little trimming and smoothing to remove any flares or long growth. It must be very judicious trimming, however; you don’t want to trim off all the extra hoof growth like you would do in preparation for putting on a shoe. You need to leave a little extra hoof wall for protection, and carefully smooth the edges so they won’t be as apt to chip and split when the horse is ridden on rocky ground or a gravel road.

If the horse had been shod all his life and you want to transition to barefoot, do it gradually. Don’t just take the shoes off and try to ride him; this would be like a human trying to go barefoot after wearing shoes all winter; you’d want to try walking in socks first! If the horse was shod with hoof pads, have your farrier do one shoeing without the pads, to let the sole start toughening up and enable the frog to “breathe” again. Then do one more shoeing in which just the front feet are shod and the hind shoes left off. The next step will be barefoot all round, with just a careful trimming.

A big factor in whether the horse can handle being barefoot is how the feet have been trimmed. The hoof must be in balance or it won’t be able to handle the resultant extra stress on certain parts. When a horse is shod, his feet are not going to split and crack under pressure, even if his feet are out



Jeff Minor, a farrier near Salmon, Idaho, takes the shoes off.

of balance, because he has the protection of the shoe. So if you want your horse to go barefoot, it is very important that whoever is doing the trimming has good knowledge about hoof balance and where the breakover should be in the natural barefoot hoof, where the heels need to be for good support, and how to remove any unnatural flare in the hoof wall. Otherwise the feet will split and break and the horse will go lame.

If the horse has much flare on one side of the foot, he may need to be shod a couple of times to protect the foot while it is being correctively trimmed and grown out in a more appropriate angle and balance. The horse must have a sound, solid, well-balanced foot to start with, before you can expect him to go barefoot and keep a healthy foot. You need a good farrier who

knows what he/she is doing in working toward a barefoot type of trim.

Other ways you can help a horse make the transition is to paint a “toughening” substance on the bottoms of the feet to help toughen the sole. Tia Nelson, a farrier in Helena, Montana, makes her own concoction that she calls “sole paint”: one part tincture of iodine (7 percent solution), one part turpentine and one part formaldehyde. This mixture should only be used on the bottom of the foot, being very careful to never get it on the hoof wall or skin because it burns the tissues and will cause the hoof wall to dry out too much. This mixture can be painted onto the sole and frog with a small bristle brush, or sucked into a small syringe and carefully squirted over these areas. This concoction kills thrush as well as toughing the bottom of the foot. She uses it once a day for 5 days on horses that will be going barefoot. Another substance that works just about as well is just plain tincture of iodine. The same precautions apply: don’t spill any on the horse’s hoof wall or skin.

When you first start riding the horse again after allowing him time to toughen up his feet, do it gradually with some short rides—and don’t start out on a gravel road. Gradually adjust the horse to more distance and to abrasive or rocky terrain. If you have to do a longer ride in the rocks before his feet are fully toughened, use hoof boots to protect his feet.

There are several brands of boots available, with various shapes and sizes that can accommodate most riding purposes. These can be used on long rides, especially on rocky terrain. There are also some glue-on varieties that are popular for use in competitions like endurance riding. These can protect the horse’s feet and make sure they don’t wear too much and become sore, allowing him to go barefoot again after the competition is over.



Heather Smith Thomas has raised and trained horses for 50 years and has been writing about them nearly that long, selling more than 9000 stories and articles and publishing 20 books. Recent books include *Storey’s Guide to Raising Horses*, *Storey’s Guide to Training Horses*, *The Horse Conformation Handbook*, *Stable Smarts*, *Beyond the Flames—A Family Touched by Fire*, *Care and Management of Horses*, and *Understanding Equine Hoof Care*. She and her husband raise beef cattle and horses on their ranch near Salmon, Idaho.

You can see more of Thomas’s work at her two blog sites, at [www.heathersmiththomas.blogspot.com](http://www.heathersmiththomas.blogspot.com) and <http://insidestorey.blogspot.com>. Two new blogs are posted every other week and the old ones are always there as well.