Definition: Abscess - A localized collection of pus caused by suppuration buried in tissues, organs or confined spaces. Usually due to an infective process. Origin: L. Abscessus, from ab = away, cedere = to go

An abscess is the body’s way of trying to expel a foreign object (like a small piece of gravel, or necrotic tissue created from a severe bruise or loss of blood to an area, or necrotic tissue from a deep puncture where in the surface of the wound closes faster then the bottom of the wound can heal creating a pocket that is unable to drain.

Hoof abscesses are probably the most common affliction horses suffer. It would be hard to find a horse owner that has never experienced an abscess either directly on their own horse or on another horse in their boarding facility.

Here are some things that can contribute to an abscess:  
1. Puncture wound (stepping on a nail for example) 
2. Severe bruise 
3. A foreign body working its way in through a damaged are in the whiteline, or a crack in the hoof wall. 
4. Laminitis – abscesses in this case are from the death of internal tissues and easy access to pathogens and foreign bodies through the damaged whiteline. As the hoof begins to heal and circulation recovers, dead tissue in too great an amount for the body to reabsorb, must be expelled

The easiest indication that an abscess is brewing is sudden severe (3-legged) lameness on one foot. Often there will be heat in the foot and sometimes the leg above the hoof will swell, even as far up as the knee or hock. Often the digital pulse will be palpable.

REHABILITATION

Everything works sometimes, Nothing works every time.

It can be very difficult to locate the exact site of an abscess that has not yet “ripened”…it is a common veterinary practice to attempt to locate the site in the sole and dig a small hole in an attempt to open it and allow it to drain. The upside of this is the pain relief is immediate. The downside of this is that if the exact site is not located, a hole has been made in an otherwise healthy area of sole. Since any invasive procedure remains the legal domain of the veterinary profession, applying a soak/poultice to draw out the abscess is the safest procedure for hoof professionals.

My approach to help a suspected abscess erupt is either to soak in Epsom salts daily to help draw it out, or to simply apply a clay poultice or both. I prefer the horse be turned out and moving as that helps work the abscess out. Even if the abscess has ruptured I would soak and/or poultice for a few days more to help draw all of the purulent material out.

I carry a simple kit in my truck so I can slap on a quick poultice if I’m there, or I email instructions to the owners on how to do it if I’m not there.
**The Abscess Kit I Carry In My Truck Contains:**

Clay Poultice - the clay could be any number of wet clay poultices on the market, but the one I use most is medicated and is called Antiphlogistine by Absorbine. It is a kaolin based clay. Bentonite based clay is the other type...some of these are medicated, some aren't...Finish Line makes a good one that's not medicated called Original Premium Clay.

I use both kinds...the non-medicated kind you can add your own preferred medication or treatment to it if you want.

Betadine scrub (or mild iodine)-- I often use a self contained surgical scrub sponge, the kind surgeons use to scrub their hands before surgery. It has a sponge on one side and a very softly bristled brush on the other side and is presoaked in iodine scrub solution. I keep some of these in my truck generally to clean any cuts/wounds I run across either on a critter or myself.

Cotton – I like to use what is called “cast padding” because it comes in small rolls that are easy to grab and apply one handed. It is sometimes cotton, sometime rayon depending on the brand. It is more expensive than sheet cotton, but so much easier to handle. However, you can buy sheet cotton and make it into manageable rolls yourself if you prefer.

Vetrap or off brand cohesive bandage
Duct tape – I REALLY love Gorilla Tape over regular Duct Tape. Gorilla tape is Duct tape on steroids!! Its a bit more expensive, but it has super stick power and it is a thicker, tougher tape that will hold up to wear much better.

The method I use is:
Coat the entire bottom of the hoof nice a thick as if you were frosting a cake. Cover frog and everything.
Wrap with a layer of cast padding or sheet cotton and Vetrap it on.
Then put duct tape over that and turn the horse out.
Leave it on for 2 days if it doesn't rain, or until it falls off which ever comes first.
If not better, repeat.

There are a number of other treatment options to help resolve an abscess. Some commonly used products are:
Animalintex
Epson salt poultice
HOOFix Kit
Icthamol (aka Bear Grease)

Links to these items can be found in your discussion group Links section in the “rehab” folder.

TRIMMING CONSIDERATIONS

When an abscess happens, there will most often be a response of excess growth in other areas. I call it a “support response.” Most commonly I see it as a thickening or lump in the sole or bar or both either underneath an abscess that erupted at the hairline, or around an abscess that erupted on the sole itself. Sometimes the exit path of an abscess can be very circuitous creating a path of damage that winds around all through the foot like a river, but mostly it confined to one area. What’s important is to notice the support response and respect it for what it is, leaving it alone until it releases on its own.

What follows is one example of the early support response (the first two pictures) and the release of the support response in the remaining pictures.
ABSCESS

A large abscess erupted in the soft tissue of the bulb.

On the bottom of the foot, there is a pronounced thickening of the bar and sole below the abscess. This is an indicator that the foot is thickening where the abscess has undermined the horn. That should be respected as a support response and left alone until it releases on its own indicating the extra support is no longer needed.
SIMILAR BULB ABSCESS AS ABOVE – SHOWING WHAT WE MIGHT EXPECT THE PREVIOUS HOOF TO DO AS THE ABSCESS FALLOUT REACHES THE GROUND.

The flare is the result of the abscess reaching resolution at the ground. Unattached horn is easily bent outward producing the flare.

This is the ground surface where the flare is. You can see where the once solid thickened bar that we had been leaving alone for support, has now split right down the middle.

The horn is no longer attached from the crack to the heel

Heel is no longer attached as the abscess has undermined the horn.

Side view showing where the old heel is no longer attached.
Initial opening of unattached bar overlay revealing

Fully opened. Old non-attached horn removed, new healthy growth exposed….it will harden and mature fairly quickly and the heel and bar will regrow fully over time.