

# Natural Hoof Care – Founder Rehabilitation



Please read all the information on this sheet carefully. Founder rehabilitation involves much more than just how the feet are trimmed. Successful recovery depends upon many aspects of your horse's life that must all be brought into line together to allow your horse to heal. In this document are suggestions based on established and emerging research, as well as years of field experience with foundered horses. Many of these suggestions will very likely conflict with your veterinarian's recommendations. Feel free to discuss your plans with your vet, but remember, it's *your* horse, so ultimately, it's *your* decision.

- 1. 24/7 Turnout:** Horses are physiologically designed to move about almost constantly over great distances. Optimum circulation (blood flow) in horses is achieved through movement. Good blood flow is essential for healing damaged tissues – in ANY animal, including humans. Putting a horse in a stall to “heal” is counter productive, both physically and psychologically. How much initial activity depends upon the individual's specific needs and the degree of physical damage.
- 2. 24/7 Access to a variety of grass hays:** Horses are physiologically designed to eat small amounts almost continuously over a 24 hour period. The bulk of their diet in nature is grass, and not just one kind of grass as is commonly the case in our domestic pastures. Horses travel over many miles eating a wide variety of plants. Dietary issues are closely linked to founder in horses, what they eat can make or break efforts to heal founder.
- 3. Dry lot:** While grass forage is natural to horses, the domestic environment poses a danger to horses living in lush green pastures. In the wild, horses must move many miles per day (average 20 miles or more) to find all the nutrition they require. In the domestic environment on lush pasture the horse need only move a few yards to fill its belly. Additionally, most pasture grasses today have been improved for higher sugar and carbohydrate content in order to fatten cattle. This is too much for horses and is the main reason there are so many instances of “spring grass founder.” New spring grass is very rich, but lush grass anytime of year can be a founder trap especially for horses at risk – older, obese, cresty, inactive horses. If your horse has already had problems with laminitis, or full blown founder, it will likely be very sensitive to lush grass. Always.
- 4. No alfalfa, clover, or other legume hay:** Although the specific problematic components have not yet been isolated, legumes -particularly an abundance of legumes such as alfalfa and clover- have been implicated as a founder trigger.
- 5. No sweet feed or concentrates:** processed concentrated feeds, and sugared grains (especially sweet feed) upsets the natural balance in the digestive system. High sugars and high carbohydrates in processed concentrated feed are a known founder trigger.
- 6. Movement:** Movement is essential for optimal circulation as outlined in #1. Providing 24/7 turnout is essential, but domestic horses must have a reason to move. You can place your horse in a 100-acre field and if he stands by the gate all day waiting for you to come with food, he is no better off than if he were in a stall. If your horse does not move much, you will need to set up your paddock to encourage movement, or take him on walks every day. How soon or long will depend upon your horse's current condition – don't force him if he is in great pain.

7. **Provide a herd mate:** Horses are prey animals and are psychologically designed to live in a herd. They need at least one other horse in their “herd” in order for them to maintain an optimal level of mental health. An “only” horse is mentally and emotionally stressed, even if he doesn’t show it. Plus, a herd mate will provide at least some reason to move about more. Depending upon the condition of your horse, you may need to begin with a calm companion that will not pick on the foundered horse, but one that will stimulate it enough to move about.
8. **Vaccinations and wormers:** Wormers are chemical poisons designed to kill internal parasites and it is being fed to your horse. While it is important to keep parasites under control, foundered horses are already metabolically out of balance and in most cases toxic in one or more areas. Their immune systems are over taxed. Working with your veterinarian, design a health care program that minimizes the impact of worming, or vaccinating. For example: ask your vet to do a fecal exam (like they do for your dogs and cats) and worm only when absolutely necessary. Discuss with your veterinarian the possibility of minimizing vaccinations or eliminating them all together – at least for a year or two. Since your horse won’t be traveling, many routinely given vaccinations might be safely withheld. If vaccines MUST be given, ask if they can be spread apart, rather than given as combination shots to minimize the impact to the horse’s system. The bottom line here is to weigh the risks and benefits against the possibility of triggering of another laminitis episode.
9. **Minimize use of Bute and other similar drugs (NSAIDs):** Oral anti-inflammatory medications can irritate the stomach. Founder is intimately linked to alterations in the digestive tract. The less gastro-intestinal challenges, the better. Also, pain is present for a reason...while we want the horse to move, we don’t want him to move too much too soon if his feet cannot handle the stresses. Easing pain is important; eliminating it entirely is not always the best choice as some discomfort prevents the horse from over-doing it too soon. Herbal preparations are available that ease pain, but have less impact on the gut. Commonly administered I.V. medications (vasodilators and pain meds) have a similar negative effect, via the blood supply, on the processes in the hoof as it tries to correct itself. However, if the horse is down and medication is the only way to get it on its feet, then by all means, that takes priority. Discuss your options for pain control with your holistic veterinarian.
10. **Regular and individually tailored barefoot trims:** The use of shoes and pads as is typically prescribed for foundered horses has a very low success rate overall. Most conventionally minded professionals view founder as an irreversible condition and the type of care they recommend is to provide the horse comfort and possibly gain a bit more use out of the horse before it ultimately has to be put down. Holistic minded professionals manage founder with an understanding that it can be completely reversed if the *whole horse* is managed properly and diligently. Restoring natural hoof function, that is possible only in the *unshod* hoof, is an essential component.

**This is just the basics. A specific regimen will be tailored to your horse’s individual needs by your hoof care practitioner and adjusted as your horse’s condition changes.**