

Keep him sound

Enjoy a full summer of riding with our top advice for keeping your horse's legs in great shape


Protecting your horse's legs from injuries is important all year round, but it can be particularly challenging in the summer months. Ground conditions can be variable, ranging from rock hard to slippery to soft in days during periods of unsettled weather, and horses must adapt quickly to these changes to escape injury. The increased daylight hours at this time of year also means horses are turned out for longer periods of time, which again may increase the risk of injury, especially if they are irritated by flies or upset by the weather. In addition, horses are often worked harder and for longer periods of time during the summer months and this could increase the risk of injury, particularly if your horse isn't fit enough.

Often signs of injury are very subtle, and early detection may prevent a more serious injury from occurring. Get into the habit of feeling each of your horse's legs on a daily basis, checking for signs of heat, pain or swelling. If you notice any abnormalities then you should contact your vet for further advice.



OUR EXPERT

HEATHER URQUHART
BVMS Cert (AVP)
MRCVS graduated from Glasgow University in 2005. She works in equine practice at Scarsdale Vets in Derby, and spends most of her time outside of work riding her mare Dotty.

Taking good care of your horse's legs can help avoid minor injuries becoming a big problem 



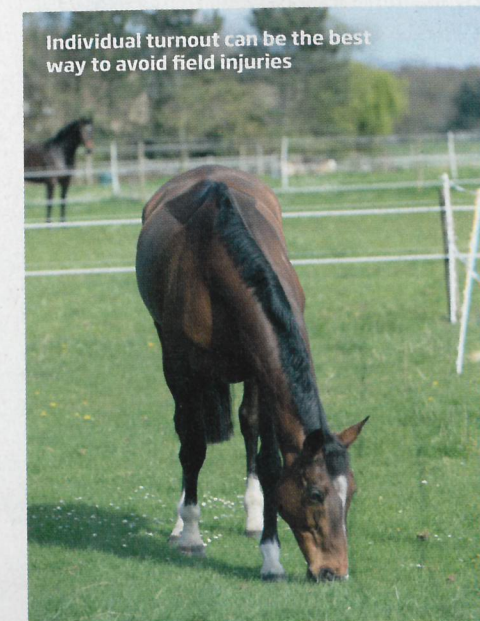
Correctly fitted boots will help protect your horse's legs from knocks

Preventing knocks and bangs

Horses can manage to knock their legs at any time of year, but we tend to see these types of injury more frequently in the summer months. This is probably due to the increased turnout time and workload that comes with summer, combined with the natural high spirits that good weather tends to cause! There are several ways that you can reduce the chance of injury, but not all options will be suitable for every situation.

Boot up

If your horse is fine-legged, thin-skinned, and prone to injury, it can be worth considering using boots when he's ridden or turned out to avoid irritating knocks. However, you should ensure that the boots are correctly fitted and made of breathable material to prevent overheating, as a hot tendon is more prone to injury. Boots applied too tightly can cause damage to the underlying skin and soft tissues, and if too loose they may cause friction rubs or even slip and cause your horse to trip.



Individual turnout can be the best way to avoid field injuries

Boots should be left on for the minimum amount of time possible, and checked regularly to ensure that no grit or mud is trapped underneath, irritating the skin, and that his legs aren't getting too hot.

With heavier-legged, thicker-skinned horses, boots may not be necessary, and may do more harm than good.

Travel boots or bandages should also be considered when your horse is being transported to help prevent unwanted knocks, but beware of the legs overheating in the summer months. Some horses appear to travel better with no leg protection at all.

Safe turnout

Horses turned out in large groups of mixed sex are often more prone to injury so consider separating mares and geldings, or turning out individually or in pairs, especially if your horse is likely to be bullied. Checking fencing regularly and replacing damaged areas will also decrease the chance of injury. Electric tape can be a particular issue if your horse is in high spirits, with injuries occurring when the tape gets caught around the legs. So make sure it's well secure and consider which horses are on the other side of the fence - you can help avoid horses kicking out by having friends next to each other.

Look after his feet

It's important to have your farrier check your horse's feet regularly - he's more likely to catch himself if he's poorly shod or has a loose shoe. Your farrier will also be able to check for cracks that often occur when the ground conditions are changeable.

Keeping legs cool

Overheated, sweaty legs can be more prone to injury, from skin sores and infections to serious tendon damage. There are a number of ways you can help prevent legs becoming overheated, or cool them down quickly after exercise.

Clipping for coolness

If your horse is heavily feathered then consider clipping his legs during the warmer months - this will keep him cool and will allow you to treat any skin conditions as soon as they become apparent.

Add protection

If you feel you have to use boots to protect your horse from injury when show jumping, or riding cross-country, try to choose lightweight, breathable materials and keep them on for the shortest possible time. Travel boots, if necessary, should be removed as soon as possible after arriving at your destination, and not replaced until just before you leave, and only when your horse has cooled down after work. If your horse's legs are hot when you take off travelling boots or bandages at a competition, quickly cool them off with a cold sponge. Make sure they are dry before applying boots or bandages.

Cooling off

Ice boots or cold water boots applied after



If your horse's legs feel hot when you remove his boots, wipe them with a cold sponge to cool them

strenuous exercise can aid cooling. However, remember to monitor their temperature and re-chill them as soon as they get warm to maximise their cooling effect. Cold hosing the legs or walking your horse into a stream will have a similar effect.

There are also many different cooling gels and clays available, designed to cool the legs and 'tighten' tendons. If you plan to use one of these products it's advisable to 'patch test' your horse's skin first, and only use the product if there's been no reaction after 24 hours, especially if your horse has sensitive or thin skin.



EXPERT TIP

If your horse isn't keen on cold hosing, start right at the bottom of his leg, just above the hoof. This gives him time to get used to the sensation before you start to move the hose up. It's often the feeling of cold water on his hot skin that he's objecting to.



Using cold water boots after exercise are an effective way to cool legs



Cooling your horse off after exercise will help him relax and stretch his muscles

Avoiding tendon injuries

Injuries to tendons and ligaments can occur at any time, but we tend to see an increased number during the summer. This is probably due to the combination of increased workload and the problem of overheating. It's important to remember that early recognition of tendon problems may help to prevent more serious injuries. By getting into the habit of regularly feeling your horse's legs you'll be better placed to recognise when something is going wrong, and will be able to seek veterinary attention faster.

Warm up and cool down

Risk of injury can be minimised by ensuring you stick to a warm up and cool down regime when you're exercising your horse, regardless of the weather. Just because the weather's warmer doesn't mean his muscles and tendons don't require warming up. Again, the cool down period is important to allow him to relax and stretch his muscles after exercise, and helps to cool muscles gradually to prevent them stiffening up.

Get him fit

Any increase in workload, especially if fast work is to be introduced, should

be made gradually, and legs should be carefully checked for areas of pain or swelling immediately following exercise and again when they have cooled down. Walking and trotting carefully on a firm surface is known to help to strengthen tendons, and this work should be regularly incorporated into your horse's fitness regime. In addition, it's worth riding your horse on varying terrain and ground conditions to allow him to cope better when the going is not perfect. However, try to avoid conditions that are very 'holding', such as sticky or slippery mud - if you must ride in these conditions then try to avoid making sudden turns, sticking to straighter lines if you can.

Foot care

Regular foot care by your farrier to keep your horse's feet in good balance is also important. A poorly shod or trimmed foot may put unnecessary strain on the tendons and other soft tissue structures of the legs. Studs in the shoes could be considered to improve grip after consultation with your vet and farrier, but it's important, if you use them, to choose the correct ones for the job. 🐾