

# Bare necessities

Careful considerations can make the transition from shod to barefoot a lot easier. Kiera Boyle investigates

▼ Softer surfaces are more comfortable for barefoot horses, especially early on.

While it used to be rare to see a barefoot horse outside of the field or retirement, nowadays barefoot horses are seen across a wide range of disciplines.

Growing scientific research has led many owners to remove traditional metal shoes, whether they're aiming to resolve a long-standing issue, support better hoof development or simply explore a more natural approach.

Understanding the process and its potential benefits will help owners decide whether it's the right thing to do.

## Barefoot facts

Research findings suggest that removing a horse's shoes can provide several potential benefits, including...

- increasing blood circulation
- providing better shock absorption
- improving hoof flexibility
- reducing joint and tendon stress
- enhancing proprioception
- offering greater long-term soundness and performance

However, it should be noted that barefoot may not be right for every horse, and the best place to start is to seek advice from a qualified farrier or hoof care professional who understands barefoot management.

## Barefoot trimming

A correct and consistent trim and giving a horse time to adjust is essential for a successful transition. Whether owners employ a farrier or a barefoot trimmer, the expert needs to support their decision and have experience in barefoot management, as the trim style often differs from trimming for traditional shoeing.

Gradually, over time, the horse's hoof shape will change – the heels will widen due to the heel bulbs becoming more developed, and the hoof wall typically shortens and tightens with each trim.

The aim is to build a strong, balanced hoof that bears weight evenly, maintaining a tight white line, healthy frog and correct hoof angles.



### TOP TIP

The hoof care provider needs to work gradually with the natural shape and growth of the hoof. Removing too much at once can expose sensitive inner structures and increase the risk of issues like seedy toe.

## Twenty years of barefoot success

"My barefoot journey began over 20 years ago with an ex-racehorse named Indenture," says Jessica Grainger. "Like many, I was caught in the frustrating cycle of lost shoes and recurring lameness. As the internet became more accessible, I started researching alternatives and with full support of my farrier, who was equally fed up with lost shoes, I decided to give barefoot a try. I've never looked back.

"Since then, I've competed up to BE100 with my cob, Ruby, who I brought on from a two-year-old and has never worn shoes. Together, we've hunted, team chased, hacked countless miles and even enjoyed riding holidays – all barefoot."



Most barefoot horses are trimmed every four to six weeks, though growth rates can vary, with faster growth often seen in the summer and slower growth during winter.

## From soft to strong

After shoe removal, it's natural for horses to feel sensitive, especially if the hooves haven't been functioning naturally for a long time. The transition requires patience.

Owners can help to condition and strengthen hooves by turning their horse out and walking in-hand over different surfaces. Movement helps to stimulate blood flow and build a stronger hoof capsule over time. Some owners even create track systems made up of different surfaces, such as gravel, grass, sand and firm ground.

A balanced, low-sugar, low-starch diet is also essential in supporting healthy hoof growth. Supplements containing biotin, zinc and copper may help, especially during the transition phase.

## Boot-iful

Hoof boots can be a game-changer, particularly for horses who are footsore at first. They come in a wide range of sizes and styles so you can select the perfect type to suit your horse.

Most are used for riding on tougher terrain, such as roads, stones or long-distance hacking, but some can be used temporarily during turnout if the horse is feeling sore or recovering from an abscess.

The hoof boot provider can advise on sizing and some even offer a professional fitting service. Many companies also offer fitting guides or trial periods so owners can make sure they've purchased the right ones.

### TOP TIP

Sending off a forage sample for analysis to test which minerals are lacking means owners know exactly what to supplement in his diet.



◀ Barefoot hooves will often be trimmed with a softer, rounder edge to help prevent cracking of the hoof wall.

“Hoof boots can be a game changer, particularly for horses who are footsore”

## A natural return to horses

"When I got my mare, Connie, I came back to horses after a 20-year break, and up until then, my previous horses had been shod," Kay Inkster explains. "As I settled back into horse ownership, I started exploring new approaches and that's when I came across the idea of going barefoot.

After plenty of research, I decided to give it a go.

"The transition was surprisingly smooth. I used hoof boots at first to support her through the early stages, but she now goes barefoot most of the time — only wearing boots if we're competing in endurance. Connie and I now enjoy all kinds of activities, including eventing, TREC and western equitation." ➔





## Saved by barefoot

"In 2021, my mare went lame and was diagnosed with deep digital flexor tendon (DDFT) damage, navicular changes, and coffin joint arthritis," Lindsay Brooks explains. "She had surgery, followed by prolonged box rest and remedial shoeing, but nine months later, she went lame again. That's when I was told the kindest option might be to have her put to sleep.



"Refusing to give up, I made the decision to remove her shoes. Incredibly, within just two weeks, she seemed more comfortable. I gave her six months off to adjust barefoot, supporting her with hoof boots, and then slowly brought her back into work.

"Three years on, she's not only sound, she's thriving. We're back in full work and out competing again. Going barefoot saved her life."

## Barefoot essentials

There is a whole range of products on the market designed to help support horses transition to barefoot. However, it's important for owners to understand that good hoof care starts from within. So, to start with, it's worth ensuring the horse is receiving...

- good quality forage, in sufficient quantities to allow the hindgut to function efficiently. This means nutrients will be better absorbed and, therefore, more likely to be effective
- a complete feed or balancer that meets the horse's dietary requirements, depending on their age, body condition/weight, type and workload
- a hoof supplement to help promote stronger, healthier hooves. Biotin is the key ingredient to consider here, with research indicating that 15–25mg of biotin per day can increase hoof wall strength and growth

The next thing for owners to consider is how they can support the transition to barefoot externally.



▲ Horizontal lines on the hoof can indicate disruptions in growth, often caused by changes in diet.

- Hoof boots – designed to protect the horse's entire foot, including the soles, heels and toes, from uneven and stony terrain which could cause bruising and soreness
- Topical treatments – with such a huge variety of hoof care products available, it can be difficult to know which one is most suitable. Products designed to harden the hoof horn can be beneficial, but it's important to take individual factors into account, so consulting a hoof care expert is best practice **ETN**

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