

Symptoms of lameness include:

### **Signs & symptoms of lameness in horses**

- Limping
- Head bobbing
- Holding a foot up
- Inability to turn smoothly
- Dragging a toe
- Not lifting hooves
- Standing imbalanced
- Slower performance

The severity of lameness can be measured using a lameness scale (AAEP):

- **Grade 0:** A sound horse .
- **Grade 1:** Lameness that is difficult to observe and is not consistently apparent.
- **Grade 2:** Lameness that is difficult to observe at a walk or when trotting in a straight line, but consistently apparent under certain circumstances.
- **Grade 3:** Lameness that is consistently observable at a trot under all circumstances.
- **Grade 4:** Lameness that is obvious at the walk.
- **Grade 5:** Lameness that produces minimal weight bearing in motion and/or at rest, or a complete inability to move.

# Front leg lameness

If there's head-bobbing at the trot, he's lame, trying to shift his weight off a sore foot or leg by making extra balancing movement with head and neck.

To check for lameness, have someone lead the horse at a trot, directly away from you, and back again - with enough slack in the lead rope so the horse's head is free and you can see any head-bobbing. Also watch from the side as the horse is led past at a trot.

The key point is to note the timing of an exaggerated head elevation at the trot. When the painful front leg hits the ground, the horse will elevate his head to lessen the impact on that leg. While not easy for beginners, watching the head movements and the foot fall is key to helping decide which limb is affected.

Use a straight background like a fence or shed roof to provide a level reference point. This can help you see a non-symmetrical head bob or a drop of the withers or hip when the horse lands on the good leg.

# Back leg lameness

Compensation movements for a hind leg lameness are harder to detect than for a front leg. The horse may only bob his head for severe hind leg pain - and this may be misinterpreted as lameness in a front leg.

A more reliable way to pinpoint hind leg lameness is to stand behind him as he is led directly away from you, to compare the up-and-down movement of his hips.

If pain occurs early in the stride as the lame foot takes weight, the rest of the stride will be shortened; the hip will pop up as the horse gets off that leg quickly. Again, the rising movement of the hip associated with the foot fall of the painful leg is the diagnostic

To evaluate hip movement, imagine a big T on the back end of the horse while standing behind him, with the tail dividing the hind quarters in half and the top of the T connecting the points of the hips. As the horse moves, the rise and fall of the hips will be obvious as you envision this horizontal line.

### Importance of nerve blocks in Diagnosis:

**Diagnostic nerve and joint blocks.** These analgesic techniques are perhaps the most important tools used to identify the location of lameness. Working systematically, the veterinarian temporarily deadens sensation to specific segments of the limb, one region at a time, until the lameness disappears. This procedure isolates the area of pain causing the lameness. Blocks can also help determine whether the condition is treatable.

### References

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