

**Lilydale Clinic**

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Lameness - Causes and Diagnosis

Lameness occurs in most horses at some point in their life, but is usually a mild and self resolving issue. However, sometimes horses can get a more chronic lameness that requires tests to diagnose the cause and treatment to resolve it.

Lameness is basically when a horse is limping, and it can occur in any leg and from a number of causes. There are varying grades of lameness, 0-5, where 0 is a normal horse, 1 is a mild lameness, up to 5 where the horse cant put the leg on the ground at all. A grade 5/5 lameness usually indicates a severe infection, such as cellulitis or a joint infection, a foot abscess or a broken leg.

The first step in diagnosing a lameness is working out which leg is sore. Sometimes it is easy when the horse is so sore that he/she cant put the foot on the ground, but other times all you can feel is an unevenness when riding. The best way to diagnose a mild lameness is to walk and trot the horse towards and away from you in a straight line and then lunge the horse on both reins at the trot. With a front leg lameness you will see a "head bob", with the horses head going UP when they bear weight on the sore leg and DOWN when they land on the good leg. Hind limb lamenesses are harder to diagnose however you will usually see a LIFT of the hip when the sore leg hits the ground.

There are many and varied causes of mild lameness. Most are simple strains or sprains that will resolve with rest alone. However if the lameness is persistent after a few days, or you notice any heat or swelling in the leg at all it is best to have a veterinary visit to rule out joint and tendon problems that will be made worse by continuing to ride or exercise the horse.

The vet will usually perform an exam to determine which leg is sore, then palpate over the leg and check the joints and tendons. The vet may perform flexion tests to see if any of the joints are sore. Hoof testers are used over the foot to check for any foot pain. If the location of the pain is unable to be localised by exam alone, then a series of nerve blocks are performed, where we sequentially numb the sensory component of the leg until the horse goes sound and we know the area in the leg the pain is coming from.

Once the location of the pain is found then tests may need to be performed to reach a final diagnosis and then make a treatment plan. This includes ultrasound if a tendon or ligament is suspected to be injured, or xrays if a bone or joint is suspected to be the problem. Vets, including our clinic, now have access to portable digital radiography machines where xrays can be taken and the results come up on a screen immediately, allowing rapid diagnosis and treatment planning.

Treatment depends on the cause of the lameness, including antibiotics if an infection is present, draining a foot abscess, antiinflammatories and rest for sprains/sprains, through to more complex treatments for joint and tendon problems.

If your horse shows signs of lameness, please contact the clinic on 9739 5244 to book an appointment.