

## NO HOOF, NO HORSE

☐ *Demonstrate picking out hooves safely, with a knowledge of reasons for routine hoof care.*

**OBJECTIVE:** While hoof picking is a routine part of the grooming process, we have made it a separate objective in the Learning Levels to **emphasize the importance of regular hoof care**. Students should understand and be able to articulate the reasons for hoof cleaning prior to a ride *and* as part of a horse's daily care. They should use terms like **bacteria** and **thrush**, and know signs of a hoof needing treatment.

Red Level students should also be **comfortable handling the hooves** and capable of picking them out independently. While some students take to this easily, others struggle to balance the weight of the hoof, or are fearful in close proximity to the horse's legs. You may even encounter a student who objects to the dirty nature of the job! You can help intimidated beginners lift and hold hooves until they build confidence, but to earn their checkmark, students should be able to do the whole job without your help.

**CHECKING IT OFF:** As hoof picking is a routine part of grooming before a ride, regular lesson students will be able to practice on a weekly basis (unless you have lesson horses doing back-to-back rides!). This practice should take place *under supervision* until you are confident that students can handle the cleaning process *and* the tactful negotiation required by a non-compliant horse.

You can discuss parts of the hoof and the reasons for routine care wherever you see fit, but it will make the most impact if you introduce it as they wield their hoof picks—especially if they catch a whiff of thrush!

**You'll know they've got it:** if they can lift and pick all four hooves, safely positioned facing the rear of the horse. At your discretion, you may wish to allow *minimal* assistance for very small children, or students who are otherwise incapable of physically handling the weight of the hoof.

### LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

"What should you do if the horse doesn't lift up his foot for you? Can you think of some reasons why he might not respond?"

"Why do we pick the hooves facing the horse's tail?"

"What parts of the hoof look sensitive to you? Where might a stone get caught?"

"Where would you find the horse's frog? The white line? What do you think would happen if they got infected?"



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## HEEL TO TOE

In order to teach hoof care effectively, you will need to begin with some basic lessons in anatomy. You can teach **parts of the hoof** along with the rest of the pony parts, but since this requires learning *dozens* of new terms, it is best to break the information into small bites.

Introduce and locate each part using a real hoof at first, if possible. Ask students to relate each part of the hoof with their own foot—they also have a **sole**, **heel** and **toe**. The **frog** is memorable (especially if you warn them that it has a funny name first!) but students may find it difficult to remember the **white line** unless they get a very clear look at it, which is difficult with shod hooves.

You can briefly discuss the function of each part of the hoof, but avoid overloading students with too many new terms or with detailed physiology. **When it comes to teaching Red Level lessons, sometimes less is more.**



**Print and laminate a diagram of the horse's hoof, or enclose it in a clear plastic page protector.** Students can then use dry erase markers to practice labeling the different parts, or match it with stickers. (Much easier—and safer—than trying to attach stickers to the underside of a hoof!)

**You can also find a study set for *Parts of the Hoof* - and more! - in our Quizlet classroom: <https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/resource-center/challenges/quizlet/>**

## STAND IN THE HORSE'S SHOES

Students usually appreciate why we pick the hooves to check for stones - it sounds painful enough to be memorable! But if you really want to drive the point home, ask your students to place a pebble inside their boot and ease their weight onto it. **ASK: How does that feel? Imagine you were wearing a heavy backpack, and had to go jogging with the pebble stuck in your shoe. What would that do to your foot?**

It's also a good idea to save any particularly alarming rocks you may retrieve in your own grooming for show and tell. At HorseSense, our examples include a palm-sized rock and a bottle cap, both pried from the underside of a horse's hoof.

Preventative care can be a slightly harder concept to learn. Ideally, you will have a horse available with just enough thrush that they can **smell it**. Once students experience that odor, they will never forget it! If your horses all have excellent hooves or you live in a dry climate, try to at least collect some photos or video showing what a diseased hoof looks like. Remind students that unhealthy feet are **tender**; would they want to jog with the backpack on sore feet?

You can also introduce signs of a hoof requiring farrier attention. Although students aren't *required* to discuss this knowledge until Green Level, they do need to be able to identify major issues that would prevent the horse from working comfortably, such as a loose shoe or missing hoof wall.



**Are your horses barefoot, shod, or both?** This difference often catches a student's interest. **Explain the purpose of shoes as well as the rationale between why the horse does or does not require them.** Emphasize the importance of considering each horse's individual needs: although there are strong opinions about farrier care, neither shoeing or barefoot trimming is entirely wrong. **It's all about what's right for the horse!**

## HOWS AND WHYS

Picking hooves is a process that an experienced equestrian takes for granted. After handling hundreds of dirty hooves, you probably clean all four feet without thinking too much about it!



But beginner students need to have this process broken down into small, simple steps.

- 🐾 **FIRST THINGS FIRST:** Approach the horse safely at the shoulder and make contact. What is his **body language** telling you?
- 🐾 **IN POSITION:** Is the horse's **body positioned in a way that will allow him to pick up the hoof easily?** Or do you need to balance his weight by moving him over, or push him away from the wall? **Your own body also needs to be in the right position:** facing the tail. This allows you to see any movement on the horse's part and to step safely out of the way.
- 🐾 **TELL THE HORSE WHAT'S COMING:** Run your hand from the shoulder (or hindquarters) down the back of the horse's leg. It is usually easiest to pick a front hoof first, followed by the hind foot on the same side.
- 🐾 **ASK NICELY:** Lean your shoulder against the horse's shoulder or hindquarters to **shift his weight.** Then **squeeze a pressure point on his legs to ask him to lift.** Some horses are trained to pick up their hoof when you squeeze the tendons. Most horses will respond to having their chestnut squeezed on the front legs; the chestnuts are not as sensitive on the hind legs, so try the point of the hock instead. Avoid grabbing at the leg or pushing against the knee or fetlock, which can scare the horse or discourage him from lifting the hoof.
- 🐾 **OFFER SUPPORT:** Run down the back of the leg as the horse lifts up, until you can hold the **toe of the hoof.** Holding the pastern or fetlock is uncomfortable for the horse and makes your job harder—especially if it's a back hoof!
- 🐾 **CLEAN IT QUICK:** Use the hoof pick to dig packed dirt and/or bedding from the underside of the horse's hoof. It is safest to scrape from **heel to toe,** but you can turn the hoof pick around to work stubborn mud out of the corners of the frog. **Work efficiently;** you and the horse will both get tired from holding the hoof up for a long period of time. It is okay to scrape firmly as long as you are gentle with the sensitive tissue in the frog.
- 🐾 **WATCH THE TOES:** Gently **release the hoof,** making sure your own foot is underneath! Straighten up and run your hand along the horse's body as you move toward the next hoof, so he knows where you are going.

**Do you follow all of these steps when you demonstrate hoof picking to your students?  
If there are any you skip or do differently, do you have a good reason for it?**

**Remember that students may hear what you say,  
but they will do what you do!**





We strongly suggest that students wear properly-fitted helmets while learning to pick hooves, as with other ground skills. The proximity of their heads with the horse's legs and feet, combined with less-developed instincts and slower reaction times, makes hoof picking a risky activity, especially for small children. It goes without saying that barn-safe boots are a must!

## TROUBLESHOOTING

A Red Level student should be confident enough picking hooves that you would trust them to do the job whether you are present or not. This means they also need to be problem solvers when the horse won't cooperate. Before awarding the checkmark for this skill, make sure you go over the following situations:

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**The horse won't lift his hoof.** Teach students to pause and ask themselves: **how can I help?** Have they communicated their request clearly? Make sure students are familiar with different pressure points; if a tendon squeeze does not work, they can try using the chestnut. Is the horse **able** to pick it up easily? More often than not, a horse that won't pick his hoof up is using it to support his weight - sometimes because he is lame or sore.
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**The horse pulls his hoof away.** This can occur for a number of reasons—flies, the student taking too long, discomfort. Again, **students should ask themselves why the horse has behaved in this way before reacting.** Punishment is rarely an effective solution!  
 However, you must be also careful that students do not inadvertently teach this behavior by releasing the hoof and/or stepping back at the first wiggle of movement. Smart old school horses quickly learn this game and delight in snatching their hoof away from a timid handler.
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**The student takes too long.** Picking hooves can be strenuous work, especially for children. The longer they take, the more physically demanding the job becomes—yet you have probably encountered the student that takes FOREVER to clean each hoof.  
 While your students' efficiency will improve with practice, nudge it along by timing them and encouraging them to shave seconds off each week. You can also **challenge group lessons to a race**, but they cannot win unless all four hooves are actually clean. Any unsafe behavior such as running or grabbing the horse's leg is an automatic dis-qualifier!
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**The student fails to thoroughly clean the hoof.** Often dirt is left in the frog or white line simply because the student doesn't know **what a clean hoof actually looks like.** Small children can find it physically challenging to dig out packed mud. Occasionally, carelessness is the culprit! Work closely with these students, assisting if necessary, until they recognize and can reproduce a hoof that is clean to your satisfaction.
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**The student struggles to hold the weight of the hoof.** Make sure they are holding the hoof correctly, and that the horse is balanced over the other three legs. You may need to offer assistance, and gradually offer the student more and more of the weight until they can handle the hoof independently,
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**The student is timid around the hooves and/or tail.** Many students, especially children, are afraid of getting kicked or smacked in the face with the tail. This instinctively causes them to draw away from the horse. **Emphasize that closer is usually safer.** You may need to stand with them at first, or hold the tail until they can pick the hind hooves efficiently. Be sure to apply fly spray *before* picking hooves!

