

Founder: The Grass Cure

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In the past it was common practice to turn foundered horses out to pasture for a year, because it was understood that they would heal in that time – by growing out the damaged hoof capsule.

Somewhere along the way, as science became more dominant and the use of horses diminished, this cure was passed over in favor of newer and "better" methods of treatment.

The trouble is the new and better treatment does not work in the majority of cases. So founder and laminitis, natural to the horse, have become major issues resulting in the euthanasia of countless horses every year, and the maintenance of others in a constant state of lameness.

My personal experience confirms that the old method works, when it can be used. I have cured – or rather allowed nature to cure – two cases of founder, by prescribing what I call the “grass cure”. I instructed both owners to turn their horses out on very short (well eaten down) pasture – and to give them nothing else to eat. The theory being that the constant movement to graze, necessitated by the short grass, along with the limited calories in the tiny bites the horse could take, would cause the horses to lose weight, while moving would stimulate healing.

Even I was amazed with the results the first time this was tried. The horse, an Appaloosa gelding, was obese. I had warned his owner at each trim that he was getting fatter and was going to founder (he had foundered previously, prior to becoming my client). Finally I got the news that, as predicted, he had foundered. Knowing the horse’s living situation, I felt it necessary he be moved somewhere else. The owner had friends with a well eaten down pasture and my recommendation was for him to be moved there and to get no other food.

A couple days later, I went to trim him. His feet looked terrible, extremely long toes, and worse, convex soles, however, he was actually moving pretty well, and the owner confirmed he was much better than when she first contacted me regarding the founder. I trimmed what I could, leaving the heels completely alone, and made an appointment to trim him again in a couple weeks.

In the meantime, the owner moved the horse to a different pasture boarding situation, where he would have even more acreage to move on. When I went to give him his second trim, I was flabbergasted by what I saw. He had lost weight and far from being obese, looked like a million dollars. Even better, he felt like a million dollars! His head was up, he was full of energy, he walked like a normal horse. His feet revealed something I had not expected – not only were his soles no longer convex, they were concave! His feet had changed so rapidly, there was a crack running across the sole from side to side. When turned loose after his trim, the horse galloped off at speed, bucking!

I had expected the “grass cure” to work – but not so fast. In less than four weeks, this horse did a complete 180. Needless to say, the owner was thrilled.

The second case in which I prescribed the same cure was a horse who had been lame for years with chronic laminitis, long before I met her. I tried for over a year to get the owner to change the horse’s diet. She was feeding the mare eastern Washington orchard grass hay – which is like cotton candy for horses. I recommended alfalfa. Alfalfa is very low in sugar, as well as being good for arthritis (this was a mare in her late teens), and ulcers, which I guessed she would have after years of pain. The owner didn’t want to feed alfalfa, so I recommended lower quality local hay, timothy, or any hay *other* than the orchard grass. With no success.

Finally, after my first experience with the “grass cure”, I suggested she let the mare out all the time on her very eaten down grass, with no other food. I was careful to state that if the mare started to get thin, she could have supplemental hay – but not enough to make her fat.

The woman tried it, and when I returned 6 weeks later for the next trim, she was ecstatic. The mare was moving so well she had actually ridden her. A Tennessee Walker, the horse had been happy to be ridden and had gaited nicely. I could see she was a different horse.

Unfortunately, when I returned in another six weeks, the horse was back in a stall, and back in pain. In this case, the owner’s psychological need to nurture the horse by feeding her, was a factor that I couldn’t overcome. Eventually, I dropped the owner as a client.

For me, those two cases proved that the grass cure can work, IF calories are reduced, and the pasture is not too rich. It is much simpler and kinder to let a horse graze all day to maintain his own weight, than to restrict his intake. The real key is movement combined with calorie reduction.

If the pasture is larger than 2 acres per horse, dividing it with hot wire is an easy fix.

It can work!