Generally, the differences between takeaway food and home cooked food are that the former is quicker, less nutritious, more expensive, less satisfying and is less healthy than the latter. Takeaway food does provide some short term satisfaction some of the time though. There are exceptions to this observation, but on the whole if a hungry person wants a satisfying, nutritious and affordable meal, they will gather the ingredients, then prepare and cook it at home. A home cooked meal takes a bit longer and requires some knowledge and effort, but ultimately it provides excellent long term benefit and satisfaction for the recipient.

In a hoof care analogy, shoeing a horse, I think, is the takeaway version of hoof care and barefoot is the home cooked equivalent. Of course there are exceptions to this generalisation and some of those will be discussed later.

The goal of most horse people is a sound horse. They would like their horse to carry out the chosen activity without pain, drama or inconvenience, reliably and consistently, when they choose. Hooves and hoof health are one key, and vital, component in achieving this goal.

Now to look at some comparisons between the two hoof care options available to horse owners; shod or barefoot.

If you can get the farrier to visit and nail a set of shoes on your horse, you will have a horse that will be, in most cases, immediately rideable on most surfaces. You will be lighter in the pocket by around $100 to $120 and your horse will be raised off the ground by pieces of steel nailed on to the ends of its legs. Every six to eight weeks the whole process will need to be repeated, repeated and repeated. In the distal limb/food analogy, your horse’s hooves are being subject to a high fat, high salt, high sugar and low fibre diet. You are paying good money for this and you are also reliant on the farrier to keep turning up at the allotted six to eight week interval. Or you could learn to shoe yourself.

Why is shoeing a horse like eating takeaway food? I believe that it may be the quick, expensive but unhealthy option to hoof care.

When horse shoes are nailed onto a hoof a number of things usually happen to the horse and hoof. Typically the heels are left a little bit long and the toe callus of a hoof is rasped to achieve a flat surface on which the shoe is nailed. Because of the higher heel internally the
pedal bone is raised more at the heel than would happen in a natural hoof. The tip of the pedal bone through this increased angle then exerts more pressure on itself onto a thinned toe callus that happens to be held off the ground by the peripheral rim created by the shoe. Very unnatural pressures and forces are in place and the hoof suffers. The quarters are left a bit long as well, setting them up for cracks and splits.

A natural or bare hoof is not flat but has arch and concavity underneath to allow it to flex and absorb the impacts and concussion of foot fall. And a natural bare hoof is meant to have ground contact over a much greater area than just the outer rim. The walls, sole, bars and frog are all meant to be in contact with the ground. This level of ground contact does not happen when a shoe is applied.

The next thing to consider when a shoe is nailed to a hoof is that it can only be done when the hoof is unloaded, being lifted off the ground and therefore in its naturally contracted state. The shoe/nails combination are a fairly unforgivingly strong steel apparatus that will hold the hoof in that contracted shape, as long as it stays in place – which is an issue in itself. Natural hoof function - the expansion and contraction of the hoof each and every foot fall - is impeded by a horse shoe. Hoof function is vital to circulation in the hoof and lower limb of the horse. Circulation and ground contact is vital to health and healing and also to feeling and sensing, or as some call it, proprioception. Some physical mechanism or pumping is needed to get blood into and out of the hoof and back up to the main organs of the horse for processing and waste elimination. Impede this vital process and you are compromising the horse’s long term health and well being.

At best a well fitted shoe will restrict some circulation. At worst a shoe that is too tight will restrict a lot of circulation. In all cases of shoeing the shoe reduces vital ground contact. How would you feel if your boots halved the blood flow to your feet and restricted your feel of the surface over which you moved?

Repeated and unnaturally hard impacts can and do inflict serious short and long term damage to the horse’s body and organs. Just as a diet that is high in salt, fat, sugar and unnatural substances is unhealthy for any living creature, a diet of unnaturally high concussion and shock will take its toll on the body of those thus exposed. And a shod hoof is subject to excessive shock and concussion – much more than a bare or booted hoof.

Despite the advent of modern plastics, the vast majority of horse shoes are steel. Steel is a very rigid material. Steel transmits shock and concussion extremely well. It is also a poor insulator and so heat and cold will run through steel and into the hoof which already has impaired circulation. The nails used to hold the shoe onto the hoof just exacerbate the breaching of natural hoof insulation. Steel is very slippery when it impacts hard surfaces such as pavement, concrete or hard ground. On the other hoof, a natural, healthy bare hoof is designed to absorb the shock and concussion that results from a large animal (and rider) moving at speed across the countryside. Again, hoof function, aided by natural hydraulic shock absorbion, and a magnificently and naturally engineered hoof absorbs these impacts and prevents them from travelling up and into the horse’s body. A bare hoof is also designed to achieve natural traction on most surfaces, most of the time, and when it can’t, it has enough feeling to signal the horse to take care. A bare hoof with its good circulation can internally regulate its temperature to maintain a healthy state.

Even with the compromise of circulation, and other problems created by horse shoes, people still choose to shoe horses. Shoeing their horse is quicker (because usually
someone else who is practiced does the work), but less healthy, more expensive even if it is “convenient.” “Good marketing” and traditionally held beliefs have also lulled many horse people into the belief that shoeing is the best thing to do.

We can learn to shoe our horses, but why would we when backed up by solid research the negative impacts of horse shoes are well understood. Every one of us can learn to maintain healthy barehoof horses – and there are many good reasons for doing so; the main one being that it is better for the horse. Barehoof is the “home cooked” version of hoof care.

I am sure that most people would agree that growing, picking and preparing a meal is a most satisfying, tasty and nutritious way of meeting our food needs. A home cooked meal of produce from our own garden and paddocks prepared with an understanding of how to combine and cook the ingredients is downright yummy and extremely satisfying. It takes knowledge, planning, preparation and time to achieve a true home cooked delight. Some people do it each and every day. Others do it on special occasions and sadly some miss the pleasure of a home cooked meal entirely.

Owning and maintaining sound and healthy barehoof horses takes knowledge, skill, work and time. To achieve the best result one also needs to have the horses in the optimum environment and being fed a balanced and nutritious diet. Movement and emotional health are additional key components of a sound barehoof horse as well. All of this can be achieved by a dedicated horse owner. Instead of paying someone else to “take care” of your horse, you are responsible - and you, as well as your horse, reap the benefits.

To obtain the best results for horse and hoof some long held traditional beliefs need to be questioned, and if found to be false, counterproductive or unnatural for the horse, then dispensed with. Things like small paddocks and stabling horses, things like having a horse living solo, things like not knowing your horse’s nutritional needs and feeding a diet that is unbalanced or inappropriate. Things like boggy ground, or no access to water to stand in, and also not knowing what a healthy hoof looks like.

If we expect our horse to carry us around, we will need to have a certain level of physical fitness and agility to ensure that we are not an unfair encumbrance or burden on our horses. It is this level of fitness and flexibility that we also need to trim and maintain hooves. Fair’s fair. However if we choose to hand the trimming and maintenance of our horse’s hooves to someone else there are two things that are important. Firstly ensure that we have a thorough knowledge and understanding of all things hoof, and also that our hoof care provider is qualified, competent and knowledgeable. Other things that are important are we and our horses must trust this person and they must be happy to explain what and why they are doing the things they do to our horses’ hooves, and be honest when they get stumped or don’t know why something is happening in the hoof.

A healthy bare hoof will do what it was designed by nature, or evolved to do; that is, mitigate the shock and concussion, allow full circulation into and out of the hoof and allow the horse to feel the surface it is travelling on.
So what are the exceptions to the takeway vs. homecooked, shod vs. bare hoof analogy?

One that springs to mind is often a shod horse can travel places where some barehoof horses cannot comfortably go. But there are bare hoof and really sound bare hoof horses. They are very different. A bare hoof paddock horse will not usually be capable of tackling a rocky trail without some form of hoof protection. This is where modern hoof boots come to the fore. Hoof boots are the practical result of the modern plastics that have been invented and some very neat design and engineering work. A well fitting hoof boot offers much more protection than a horse shoe while still allowing that vital ally of horse health - hoof function - to occur. At the end of the day, they come off, whereas the horseshoe stays on till they are removed by the farrier or they fall off, which happens all too often, with sometimes severely damaging consequences.

Another exception to the above analogy is that a neglected bare hoof is not a truly bare hoof as we understand it. There are no excuses for neglected hooves and the reality is that sound bare hooves in domestic horses take some regular effort and vigilance to create and maintain. Just like the productive vege garden, orchard and home kitchen from which we can feed ourselves.

Some horses’ hooves are very compromised by a variety of factors which often have a history of starting very early in the horse’s life. Horses that are broken in when they are still physically immature are often shod as part of this process. Hooves are nowhere near fully formed at 18 months to two years of age. If shoes are to be applied to immature hooves the hoof growth and normal development processes are restricted. Too often these horses are stabled during the breaking in process which prevents the horse from moving. Lack of circulation and movement causes poor hoof form and development and are the arch enemy of healthy hooves.

Other horses are born and left alone in paddocks which can be soft during the wet and rock hard during the dry. Hooves are too often neglected in these cases and they may break a wall off, shear a heel, flare, get diseased, split to the coronet band and suffer a host of other problems. Some of these pathologies cause the young horse’s body to compensate and it is then set up for a lifetime of unsoundness. Prevention is a much better option.

Early hoof care (monthly from four weeks of age) is a must. Not only is the foal having its hooves trimmed and balanced, it is being handled, taught to lead and be restrained. It’s so much easier to educate and habituate when they are young than when they are one or two years old and weigh three, four or five hundred kilograms. Early handling and hoof care is a win-win situation for horse and owner.
Before the foal is born, or even conceived, a nutritional plan for mum and baby needs to be developed. This is the starting block for good hooves – in the womb. Have a pasture or hay analysis done. Run the results by a horse nutritionalist, and stick with their recommendations. It will work. The dam will be getting the minerals and nutrition in balanced amounts and the foal will be growing with these goodies too. After birth the needs of both will change and again as the foal grows and is weaned. Give them what they need and you will be feeding the hooves of both mum and foal appropriately.

So the choice is ours. Easy, convenient for us and quick; or a little more effort and planning which then results in a healthier horse with hooves that can take on just about anything, day after day, year after year.

I’m keeping mine bare thanks.

Glenn Wilson
Hooves Naturally

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