

Tips for an Effective Grooming Routine

Grooming is an important component of maintaining a healthy horse. A regular, methodical grooming routine helps your horse's natural disease barrier – his skin – to remain healthy. It stimulates his circulation and massages his muscles, while it distributes the oils in his skin to create a gleaming coat.

Proper grooming makes you familiar with all aspects of your horse's physical attributes, from his skin to his unique conformation. You then can't help but notice lumps, scrapes, skin irritations, ticks or other abnormalities in a timely way. Grooming is also essential prior to tacking up your horse. If his hair is clean underneath your tack, his skin is less likely to become chaffed from wearing it. Your horse will feel more comfortable working for you, and of course another benefit is that your tack is cleaner at the end of the ride.

Grooming is also a great way to build a trusting relationship with your horse. Most horses appreciate the extra attention and care they receive during time spent in grooming before and after a ride – and even on days when there's no riding.



Suggestions for an efficient grooming routine:

① Clean out your horse's hooves first with a hoof pick. By tending to the feet first, you can look for problems that require attention or that may prevent you from riding that day – such as a loose or missing shoe. As you run your hand down each leg to lift each hoof, feel for unusual lumps, scrapes or heat that may require treatment.

Tip: When cleaning a horse's feet, your rear end should point toward the front of the horse, and your toes should point straight toward the back.

② Next comes currying. Starting at the upper neck and working toward his tail, use a curry comb in circular motions on the fleshiest parts of your horse. Currying offers many benefits to the horse:

- loosens shedding hair and dirt
- stimulates and massages the skin and muscles
- spreads natural skin oils that protect hair and produce shine

Curry in circles against the grain of the hair. When you're on the left side of the horse, curry with your right hand; alternatively, on the right side of the horse use your left hand. Avoid currying bony areas with a hard or inflexible curry, and press only as hard as the horse will tolerate. Be careful on ticklish areas such as the flank or belly, as touching these areas can trigger defensive behavior in some sensitive horses. A soft and pliable curry with tiny, flexible fingers or a textured rubber mitt may be used gently on the legs and possibly the face depending on the horse's level of tolerance.

Some people hold a curry in one hand and a stiff brush in the other to work on one patch of hair at a time, currying and then brushing each area. Others curry one side or

Winter Grooming Tips:

If your horse wears a blanket, remove it daily to look for skin irritations, kicks and cuts, weight loss, skin infections or other health concerns.

- Currying is especially important as it distributes the natural oils (sebum) that occur in extra amounts in your horse's skin. This oil helps to provide a "waterproofing" component to the hair.
- The excess sebum secreted by horses' skin in winter builds up rapidly in brushes and curries, making it difficult to get your horse clean. To make your grooming sessions most effective, sanitize your brushes regularly.
- If your horse is turned out regularly in snow or mud, consider trimming the hair on the fetlocks and pasterns to reduce the risk of scratches (also called mud fever) developing there.



the entire horse before using the first body brush. Whichever method is more comfortable for you, be sure to knock the teeth of your curry against the back of a brush occasionally to clear debris.

Tip: Many horses have a favorite area or two that they like to have curried. Try to find a special location on your horse. You'll know it when his upper lip quivers or he leans hard into the curry as if to scratch an itch.

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3 Follow currying by using a stiff-bristled body brush. Again, start at the head and work toward the tail.

Note: If you have access to a horse vacuum, you could use it in place of the stiff brush. Or, in shedding season, you could run the shedding tool along the horse's coat to remove lots of excess hair with each swipe.

Use the stiff brush in a quick, flicking motion, pushing in the direction of the hair and only as hard as the horse will comfortably tolerate. The firmer your brush stroke, the more you'll accomplish. If you're brushing effectively, you'll see a cloud of dust and hair flip from the horse with each brush stroke. Every few strokes, scrape the tips of the brush bristles against a curry or the teeth of a shedding blade to clear away debris.

Avoid brushing your horse's most sensitive areas with a stiff brush—a mare's udders, a gelding's sheath, and possibly your horse's face depending on his personal preference. Stiff brushes are safe to use on a horse's legs, just be somewhat gentle. Be sure to brush the backs of the pasterns and points of the hocks to remove dirt that collects there. The more elbow grease you use in brushing, the more natural shine you'll bring to your horse's coat.

Tip: When brushing your horse's face, stand slightly to the side rather than directly in front to protect your face from impact if the horse suddenly raises his head.

If your horse is extremely sensitive or thin-skinned and does not tolerate the coarseness of a stiff brush, look for a medium-bristled brush that still provides enough rigidity to pull dried dirt from his coat, but is slightly softer and more comfortable for his skin.



4 After using the stiff brush (or vacuuming) you could move on to either a medium brush or a soft brush. Medium brushes are often a good interim step to take on a dirty horse between using the stiff and the soft brush. Their bristles are often somewhat closer together than those of a stiff brush, so they can pull another layer of grime from the horse. They are always handy to use after vacuuming a horse. Use it in short, flicking strokes.

5 The last body brush to be used in the grooming routine is the soft brush. Its very soft, closely-spaced bristles capture the finest particles of dust on the horse's coat, and smooth the hair to leave it lying flat and sleek. Use a soft brush in long, smoothing strokes rather than short flicking action of the stiffer brushes. Remember to clean the tips of the bristles as you work by scraping against a curry or shedding blade.

If your horse is ticklish, a soft brush may be your best tool to clean hard to reach spots such as the under the jaw, under the belly and inside the gaskin. The more elbow grease you use with this soft brush—even on the face—the more natural oil is distributed to the hair and the shinier your horse will appear.



6 Use your fingers or a wide-toothed mane and tail comb to separate the hairs of your horse's mane and tail without breaking them. See the "Topical Treatments" section of this article for suggestions on using detangling products most effectively.

7 Use a clean, slightly dampened cloth to wipe debris carefully from your horse's eyes and nostrils, and another to wipe off his rectum and under the tail. This will add a soft sheen in these areas. Some horses appreciate having these areas wiped, while others resent the process. Proceed with caution until your horse is accustomed to the procedure.

Tip: Be sure to clean your brush bristles and curries by rubbing them against each other before returning them to your storage box so they're ready for the next session. See "How to Care for Your Brushes" for more details.

Does Your Horse Have a Dull Coat?

If your horse's coat is dull or dry despite regular intensive grooming, consider speaking with your veterinarian. Poor coat condition can be a sign of health problems such as internal parasites, skin infections, allergies or illness. It can also be a sign that your horse isn't eating the right foods for his age and activity level, or isn't getting an appropriate amount of exercise. Lots of good quality forage and an appropriate amount of the right type of feed, along with turnout and exercise, are the best ways to ensure that your horse grows a good coat. Too many soapy baths or baths in which too much shampoo is used can make a horse's coat look dull too. Refer to "Tips for Bathing Your Horse" for guidelines. Lastly, a freshly clipped coat is usually not shiny either, which is why you should clip your horse several weeks before a special event if you want him to shine in the spotlight.



Removing Sweat Stains

Elbow grease through currying and brushing is the best way to remove sweat stains from your horse. What better way to reward your horse for working hard for you than to make him comfortable with a rubdown? But in a pinch, you can use a towel that is barely moistened with rubbing alcohol to assist with quickly removing a sweat stain. This method is drying to the skin and hair, making it inadvisable to use every day.

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Topical Treatments

A wide assortment of grooming products may be used to supplement your grooming routine regularly or for special occasions.

Mane and Tail Detangler – If you choose to apply a mane and tail detangler, use your fingers to spread the product throughout the hair while separating tangles carefully to prevent breakage. Allow the product to sit on the hair for a few minutes before combing or brushing it for a silky effect. If you plan to braid your horse's mane or forelock, do not put detangler in the hair as it will be less likely to hold a braid. In fact, products such as Quic Braid make hair easier to braid and help to hold braids in place.

Coat Polishes – Coat polishes help repel dust and stains and add shine to your horse's coat. They are most often used after bathing, but can be used after a complete grooming session too. Apply by lightly misting the product directly on the coat, or distribute it using a fleece mitt or terry cloth towel.

Note: If you choose to apply a coat polish that contains silicone, avoid putting it where tack belongs. It can make a horse's hair so slippery that tack will not stay in place.

Spot Removers – Gray, cream and other very light-colored horses sometimes have unsightly stains caused by manure or urine. Stubborn stains that cannot be removed completely with currying and brushing can be erased quickly with the use of spot removers designed specifically for light-colored horses.

Sunscreens – Healthy Haircare Coat Care and Quick Screen Sunscreen are sprays that are intended to protect a horse's coat from sunburn. If your horse has a pink skin on his nose that may become sunburned, consider applying a non-toxic, waterproof sunblock found at your local pharmacy.

Hoof Ointments, Dressings, Oils, Polishes –

Many types of hoof treatments are available that provide therapeutic benefits, from helping to harden hooves to treating thrush. Nutritional supplements are also available to help grow stronger hooves. If you have concerns about the health of your horse's hooves, consult your farrier or veterinarian for guidance. Other hoof oils and dressings provide moisture for dry hooves or are used to enhance the look of hooves for special occasions. If you wish to treat your horse's hooves with an oil or polish, apply it at the end of your grooming session to prevent hair and dust from attaching to the wet surface. Allow it to dry before moving your horse.

Metal Curry Combs

Sometimes, old-style metal curry combs turn up in horse barns. These curries should be used for cleaning your brushes as you work by gently scraping the teeth of the comb against the tips of the bristles.



Removing Bot Fly Eggs

If you see tiny yellow spots sticking to your horse's coat, you're looking at bot fly eggs. The female bot fly usually lays her eggs in clusters on a horse's legs, flanks, chin, shoulders or mane, but they can appear anywhere. Her goal is for the horse to scratch itself – or a pasture buddy – with its teeth and ingest the eggs. Larvae can then mature inside the horse, where it can cause health and digestive problems in its host. To prevent your horse from ingesting bot eggs, remove them promptly using a bot egg knife or a Slick 'N Easy Grooming Tool.

Related Topics

[A Guide to Grooming Tools](#)

[How to Care for Your Brushes](#)

[Tips for Bathing Your Horse](#)

[About Body Clipping](#)

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A Note on Sheath Cleaning

If you have a gelding, consult your veterinarian regarding whether his sheath should be cleaned on occasion. These cleanings should be conducted by a knowledgeable horseperson or veterinarian who is equipped to handle negative reactions if the horse resists the procedure, and who knows how to perform the procedure in a safe and healthful way for the horse.

Products to assist with this task include Excalibur Sheath Cleaner and Squeaky Clean Sheath Cleaner; these are designed to gently soften the debris embedded in these areas.