

Tips for Bathing Your Horse

Regular, vigorous currying and brushing will keep your horse clean and shiny, but at times—perhaps in preparation for a show or special event—you'll want to give your horse a bath for that extra-clean shine. Baths can eliminate a buildup of salts on the skin that result from sweating and become a source of irritation. Alternatively, baths can be drying to a horse's coat if given too frequently or if too much shampoo is used. Of course, you'll want to bathe your horse only when temperatures are warm enough to make the experience comfortable and healthful, and you'll need the right tools to do a good job.

Assembling a Bathing Kit

Here is a list of suggestions for tools you might like for bathing your horse. Store them in a big wash bucket to create a convenient bathing kit.



Sponges – Choose a large sponge for washing your horse's body, and two smaller ones for your horse's face and genitals. You can use synthetic sponges or natural sea sponges. If you use liniment or body braces after working your horse, add a sponge for use only with that product. To avoid spreading contagions, don't share sponges between horses.



Sweat scraper – From simple aluminum to bright colored plastic and in many ergonomically innovative designs, a sweat scraper is an indispensable tool for removing excess water from your wet horse. Its use speeds the drying process.



Mitt – For gentle scrubbing on exceptionally dirty areas, use a mitt or scrubbing cloth. Mitts can be made of soft rubber, plastic, sheepskin or a variety of other materials. Some mitts can perform double-duty and be useful for removing sweat stains and for loosening the dirt on a horse's legs during regular grooming.



Combination tools – An innovative tool such as the Wash Brush and the Rapid Scrub Sponge combine the benefits of short scrubbing bristles with absorbent sponges.



Shampoos – All sorts of shampoos are formulated for use on horses, so you'll find one to suit the needs of your horse. Take into account your horse's skin sensitivity and surface coat condition. You may want to rely on a shampoo that contains natural ingredients, one that has herbs to relieve soreness, or one that targets stains or dry skin.



Medicated shampoos – Active ingredients are added to some shampoos to treat certain skin conditions, such as scratches and dermatitis in horses. Be sure to follow the instructions for medicated shampoos closely for the best results. Before using a medicated shampoo, Dover Saddlery product advisors recommend that you consult your veterinarian to be sure that you are addressing your horse's health concern appropriately.

Do's and Don'ts of Bathing Your Horse

- Do wet your horse's coat thoroughly before you introduce shampoo.
- Don't use too much shampoo.
- Do use separate sponges on the body, the face and the genitals.
- Don't share sponges between horses to prevent the spread of germs.
- Don't put soap on your horse's face if you'll have difficulty rinsing it thoroughly.
- Do be sure to rinse all traces of soap from your horse's coat.
- Do walk your horse after a bath to help him dry, and use a cooler or anti-sweat if needed.
- Don't shampoo your horse too frequently as it can be drying to the skin.

Have a cooler or an Irish knit sheet available to put on your horse after his bath, along with a towel or two to dry his legs. You can use a bucket to wash and rinse your horse, or if you plan to use a hose, be sure to fit it with a nozzle that has a spray setting.

Use warm water to bathe your horse. If your barn or show ground does not have warm running water, consider using the Hott Wash Titanium Pro Portable Hot Water Unit. Lightweight and easy to use, the unit comes in four and eight gallon sizes.

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Color enhancers – These are shampoos with additives that help to bring out your horse’s natural coat color. Color enhancers are popular with people who are preparing their horses for a show.

If you choose to use a color enhancer, be sure that you select one to match your horse’s coat color.



Conditioners – Some shampoos can be drying to a horse’s skin and hair by removing the natural oils. Conditioners can help to restore some of the moisture that may be lost during the shampooing process.



Hair polish – This type of product is often used on a mane, tail and certain parts of the horse just after it is bathed, particularly if the horse needs to look its best for an event the next day. Hair polish, particularly those that contain silicone, bonds to the individual hairs to help create shine, reject staining and repel dust. Because it makes the horse’s hair slippery, it is imperative to avoid coating areas where tack is worn.

To bathe your horse:

- 1 Choose a bathing location that has a non-skid surface. If you coat your horse’s hooves with hoof oil, it may help to keep water from softening the hooves while you work.
- 2 Clean out your horse’s hooves before leading him to your wash area to avoid creating mud that will splash onto your horse’s legs.
- 3 Based on your horse’s personality and experience with bathing, decide whether to tie your horse or have a helper hold him. If your horse is unfamiliar with baths, suds or hoses, having a skilled helper hold your horse can help you introduce the new experience in a positive manner.
- 4 Wet your horse thoroughly. To get him accustomed to the water temperature, start wetting at the front hooves and work your way up the front legs to the shoulder. From the shoulder move up the neck and then over the back, to the flank area, and then toward the hind legs, groin and belly. Gently wet under and around the tail, and lastly, soak the tail hair itself while standing to the side of your horse’s buttock.
- 5 Fill a wash bucket with warm water and add the recommended amount of shampoo. Follow the shampoo manufacturer’s directions, and if in doubt, using less shampoo is always best.
- 6 Know your horse in terms of wetting and washing his face. It is best to avoid spraying your horse in the face as doing so could cause him to panic and subsequently

Tip: If you use a hose, keep an eye on it to avoid letting it wrap around one of your horse’s legs.

injure himself or you. You also want to avoid getting water in a horse’s ears.

- 7 Use the large body sponge to transfer soapy water to your horse and begin the scrubbing. Again, start at the front legs and shoulder and work your way up the neck and back. Be sure to scrub the backs of your horse’s pasterns where grime tends to accumulate, and under the tail. Put a dab of shampoo into your palm to work suds into the mane and tail, throughout the hair and to the roots. Use a mitt, scrubbing cloth or even a curry to gently create suds in an especially dirty area or to work on a manure or urine stain.

Note: Bath time may be a good time to consider cleaning your gelding’s sheath (or your mare’s udders). Consult your veterinarian for a schedule of when to clean your gelding’s sheath and for help in learning the procedure. These cleanings should be done only infrequently so as not to irritate the horse’s skin. They should also be conducted by a knowledgeable horseperson 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 available to help with the procedure are Excalibur Sheath Cleaner and Squeaky Clean Sheath Cleaner.

- 8 Avoid allowing the shampoo to dry on your horse’s coat—rinse the suds from the first side before moving to the second side if necessary. Remember to use a separate, smaller sponge to clean the area of your horse’s genitals, between the hind legs and around the rectum.

Use another small sponge to gently scrub your horse’s face. Shampoos that are pH

balanced are safe to use near the horse’s eyes, but if you’re uncertain of your ability to remove every trace of shampoo from your horse’s head, use only warm water for cleansing. Soap traces left on a horse’s face can cause the delicate hair there to fall out.

- 9 Rinse your horse thoroughly. You may find it helpful to use your sweat scraper as you rinse to help remove sudsy water until the rinse water runs clear.
- 10 If you plan to use a conditioner or a hair polish in the mane and tail, apply it after all traces of shampoo are removed, and follow the manufacturer’s guidelines.

Tip: Do not spray hair polish in areas where your horse will wear tack as the polish can make the hair slippery. For the same reason, do not put conditioner or hair polish in your horse’s mane if you intend to braid it.

- 11 Use your sweat scraper to remove any excess water from the fleshiest parts of your horse. Cup each leg between your hands, and starting at the top and working your way down, squeeze gently to push the water out of the hair. Then dry the legs carefully with a towel to avoid setting up conditions for scratches (dermatitis) to form.

If the temperature begins to cool or you feel your horse might be slightly chilled, be sure to place a cooler or Irish knit sheet on him immediately and begin to walk him to help him dry.

- 12 Thoroughly rinse your bathing tools and allow them to air dry in the sun before returning them to storage. Doing so prevents a buildup of soapy residue and the development of mold or mildew on your equipment.