

Grooming for the Health of It

Whether your horse is a trail expert or show stopper, ridden daily or retired, stalled or turned out, your horse needs daily grooming to help maintain good health.

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By Marcia King

Begin grooming sessions by currying, and then brush the coat, mane and tail. "Curry a horse in a circular motion from behind its ears all the way to its dock with a rubber curry," says hunter and eventing trainer Denna Johnson of Full Partner's Farm in Gainesville, Florida. "Go down the muscular and fatty parts of the leg, down to the knee and the hock, grooming firmly to make sure the horse gets a massage out of it."

Next, begin brushing. Sheila Schils, Ph.D., an equine science specialist and 1995 Region 4 dressage reserve champion, recommends brushing from the topline down. Be sure to brush the entire body, including legs and face.

Bonnie Cicora, trainer and owner of the Post & Rail, an equestrian facility in Swanton, Ohio, says, "Finish up with the face using a very soft face brush. Always brush in the direction that the hair grows, being very careful around the eyes."

When grooming, make sure that your brushes are clean, and avoid sharing them to prevent inadvertent transmission of superficial skin diseases.

Flowing Manes & Tails"Handpicking a tail is ideal," says Schils, "but...I spray the tail with a finishing spray, let it dry a little, then brush through very slowly, letting the spray help me through it. I lose very few tail hairs." Using no-tangle preparations and care when grooming the tail, however, will help avoid pulling out hair.

For mane care, Johnson suggests taking a brush and brushing back and forth in the mane, making sure all the dirt comes up out of the scalp. Be sure to get all the way down to the base of the mane.

The Important HoofEach day, the hoof should be inspected for cracks and disease, then picked out. To pick a hoof, face the horse's rear, stand next to the leg, and lean into the horse's body to shift its weight off the side you're going to work on. Run your hand down the leg, then lift up the foot with one hand, bending it at a natural angle. With a hoof pick, remove debris from the foot. Some prefer picking from the toe back toward the heel to avoid scratching the frog. Others prefer to work from the heel toward the toe to avoid pushing debris into the heel of the frog. After cleaning the bottom of the foot, clean the sides by brushing off dirt with a short, hard-bristle brush.

From End to EndAs a daily practice, gently wipe the corners of the horse's eyes with a clean washcloth to clear away the mucus or dirt that can collect. Be sure to wipe from the top outside edge of the eye down to the bottom inside corners, so as not to spread bacteria.

Don't forget to clean under your horse's dock. "Horses, as they defecate, will accumulate some debris underneath the dock of their tails," says Schils. This debris can be irritating and cause tail rubbing. Use dampened disposable towelettes to wipe underneath the tail, the tail itself, the anal area, and in between and down the hind legs. Do not reuse these towelettes anywhere else on the horse's body.

Bath TimeIf you are careful, frequent bathing should not cause any extra problems for a healthy hoof. However, Henry Heymering, an AFA-certified journeyman farrier, warns not to let hooves stand in mud or water for any more than a few minutes, or trouble may follow.

Regardless of how often a horse is bathed, follow the basics. Wash the entire horse: face, mane, neck, body, legs, tail and underneath the tail. Scrub all the way down to the base of the mane and the tail. Always apply shampoo that has been diluted in water. Never let shampoo dry on the coat, and rinse off all traces of the soap.

Beauty From WithinGood grooming begins with good nutrition. "People bring a horse to me that is 75 pounds underweight, and then don't understand why they can't get a good shine on that horse's coat or get the horse to shed out after winter," says Johnson. "Check with your vet and make sure your worming, vaccinations and feeding programs are appropriate."