



VET'S ADVICE

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Coat care that will just *shine* through

A shiny coat is a sign of a healthy, happy horse and it's often the product of more than just grooming. Common complaints like sweet itch and pastern dermatitis can affect the condition of your horse's coat so getting them treated is the first step. Diet and the right balance of vitamins play an important part while thorough grooming and bathing will help get that show-standard sparkle for summer.

Sunburn

Most horses can get sunburn, but it is infinitely more common on the pink skin around the horse's muzzle. The tips of ears of non-pigmented horses always require protection from the sun as well. Working in an eye clinic myself, I know it is also worth discussing the pink skin in the eye. Horses have a structure in the eye called the third eyelid, and it is very sensitive to sun damage and secondary changes that can lead to tumour development. There are plenty of sunscreens out there, but my particular favourite is Filtabac as it lasts for up to three days and is non-greasy so they don't tend to look so dirty and grubby when they come in from the field.

Pastern dermatitis

Some horses are more sensitive to this condition than others, in particular quarter horses and standard breeds. White skin/haired areas do tend to be the first affected, but it can spread. In some horses, it is a "photosensitivity", a sunburn linked to liver disease that

causes this outbreak on the skin. In other horses it is a "contact dermatitis" linked to an exaggerated inflammatory reaction to pollens and products secreted by certain plants, in particular buttercups. Either way if your horse has this problem it is essential that they are examined by a veterinary surgeon before you try any other treatments, as a blood sample will be required. Once the liver can be excluded, you can discuss with your vet what topical lotions, management and wraps can be used on the legs.

Show shine

That elusive show shine generally comes from the quality of feed that is put into the horse, but I do believe that there is an element of good grooming and breeding that contributes to the degree of shine. Some colours and breeds are much better at "sparkling", while with others you could be trying for a lifetime and their coat will never shine well enough to see your face in...

I think a good vitamin and mineral balance is essential, as well as a high-fat diet to get an extra sparkle and glossy coat. Linseed is the most commonly used oil for improving the fat content in the diet and therefore adding a gloss. Flaxseed, coconut and fish oils have all been used to a greater or lesser degree, and it is important to remember that they all contain fat soluble vitamins A, D, E & K. Therefore, they should be given in moderation, as they are stored in the liver and could lead to toxicity if given in too high a quantity.



Grooming and bathing

Once the winter coat is shed there is always much more effort put into keeping the coat clean and sparkling. Generally there is a lot more benefit to the horse's skin to perform a thorough groom after exercise, as the blood supply will be close to the surface of the skin, so it will be easier to remove loose hair and scruff at this point. This should be followed by a rinse or bath afterwards.

The range of shampoos out there is huge, from products that improve the colour, to those that soothe and get rid of dandruff. Most horses start getting bathed more regularly when the weather improves as you need to wash off the sweat and dirt that will have built up during strenuous exercise.

The perfect shampoo would contain a good de-greasing agent and plenty of soothing oils. Loads of clean water and plenty of rinsing is key. However, there are products available now that you can use as a drench/wash without rinsing off

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▲ Don't forget your horse may need sunscreen, too, during the summer months; hot weather means horses need regular washing to remove dirt and sweat, left

The majority of shampoo on the market is perfect for most horses with normal skin, but you should pay close attention to the equine that has dry, itchy or scratched skin. They will be more reactive to certain chemicals in the shampoo and will therefore require a softer shampoo with fewer ingredients and detergents and more often than not a soothing essential oil in it to quieten the skin.

Sweet itch

I could probably write an entire article on sweet itch alone. However, in brief, most horses with sweet itch will be susceptible to reaction from March onwards. The midges that bite the horse and cause the problem become active once the temperature rises above 10°C, so prevention is better than cure and getting on the right management and supplements or drugs early enough is very important.

In a nut shell, the horse should not be outside at dawn and dusk, as this is when

the midges are at their most active. They will also be more abundant around areas that are wet and low lying, so avoiding marshes and water courses is essential. The horse will itch its mane and tail, but the true disease is due to an allergic reaction to the midges' saliva and they normally bite on the sheath and belly area as well as the mane and tail area, so the rugs for sweet itch prevention should always take this into consideration.

Supplements are prolific for sweet itch, and the jury is out on which ones work better than others, but certainly ones that contain garlic and essential oils to improve the dryness of the skin should be of benefit. Other creams and products can be used to soothe hot, sore skin and deter the midges from biting further. The newest products contain neem oil, which seems to help to reduce the frequency of bites.

There are studies that have demonstrated that horses on a high dose of particular B vitamins can have a reduced incidence of biting. Interestingly

the study also demonstrated that horses that had high blood sugar levels had a higher incidence of midges biting them, which makes sense as a lot of horses with sweet itch also tend to be the EMS or overweight types.

Rugs have been used extensively for trying to control biting and, admittedly, there is an argument that to prevent a horse being bitten at all you would have to cover the whole animal from top to tail, including legs, as a midge will try to bite anywhere they can if the situation arises. There are leg wraps, full body suits and fly masks that cover the ears, which will all help. I think there is some evidence to support the impregnated brands that contain a strong dose of repellent in them to help repel the bugs. The density of the netting is also important as the weave has to be very close to stop a midge penetrating it, as they are adept at getting through material. Colour has been discussed for a long time and studies of midges have been reasonably inconclusive. However, other flies did fly toward dark colours more regularly and less towards stripy and light blue.

Sprays and gels definitely have their place and there will be always be a need to use repellent on the sweet itch horse. Most products on the market contain a mixture of a chemical that repels and a combination of essential oils that we know have either repellent properties or are soothing on skin. ☐