

Holistic Hoof Tips

By Ruthann Smith

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No hoof, no horse. And, a stitch in time saves nine. Daily maintenance is the key to healthy hooves. Dirty hooves are vulnerable to stone bruises, brittleness and thrush. Horses that stand in dampness (water, mud, urine, etc.) are subject to soft feet, tenderness and thrush. Dried-out hooves are susceptible to soreness, cracking and breakage.

Prevention is your best strategy. So, here are some tips for keeping your horse sound:

- ◆ Pick. Pick out your horse's hooves *as much as possible*, including: before you take him out of the stall, before and after riding and turn out, etc. I use a traditional pick and a small stiff dandy brush designated for hooves only to finish. Clean the outside with the pick edge and brush. Note any changes.
- ◆ Clean. Thrush is very difficult to eradicate. It is contagious, plus most treatments kill the outer layer of flesh and drive the spores deeper into the hoof. Plus, the thrush feeds off the dead cells, so later it emerges even worse. Since thrush loves dampness and an anaerobic environment, clean stalls and hooves are pivotal. Good grooms pick out stalls throughout the day. If you are not at a full-service barn, why not coop with your boarding buddies? If you visit the barn at different times, have a pact that you'll pick out your horses' stalls. It only takes a minute and everyone will benefit.
- ◆ Pack. Most show horses I know get their feet packed 2-4 times a week, except when rainy. This involves rolling hoof packing into a fist-sized ball, mashing it over the bottom of the hoof and covering with brown paper. On a cupped hoof, this will stay on all night, but most hooves require duct or self-adhesive tape to hold the slippers on all night. Packing feet helps draw out foot soreness when horses are working lots, footing is hard, dry or rough like Florida's sand. Hoof packing can be a tar or poultice base, sometimes mixed with Epsom salt. Just be sure that if you pack with poultice, that the hooves don't get too soft.
- ◆ Paint. If the hoof is already too soft or footing is wet, sole paint can toughen up the bottom of the hoof and take away sting.
- ◆ Oil. Hoof oil has various uses. In Florida, where it can be very wet and horses get bathed often, they use it to keep water *out* of the hoof. It is also popular to shine and ideally condition hooves for showing. However, most people put it on thick and just before they go to the ring. This makes the footing cake on, which to me, defeats the purpose. I use a paper towel to apply a thin veneer to the outside, with time to dry. Choose a natural oil. Some use fish oil.
- ◆ Breathe. Never use hoof black or sparkles. They do not allow the hoof to breathe.

Healthy hooves are usually a matter of daily maintenance. Be mindful. And, may you always enjoy hardy hooves.

Ruthann Smith, world-class groom and braider, teaches Top Turnout™ Clinics and developed the progressive and cost-effective Lucky Braids™ coat care and braiding products. Find more grooming tips at: [LuckyBraids.com](http://www.luckybraids.com).

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