

Nix Scratches

By: Ruthann Smith

Crud on horses' heels is called scratches. Given its pervasiveness, scratches may seem innocuous. Beware: left untreated, scratches can make horses very, very lame. I have even seen them lead to systemic infections. WEF, Ocala, Indio and AZ are just a few of the places plagued by this debilitating yet avoidable condition. Fortunately, proper management can essentially eliminate the persistent condition. Here's how to save soundness, time and money with proper daily care.

The condition is a fungus, though its manifestation is caused by micro-abrasions (read: *scratches*) that open the skin, allowing the fungus to enter and crud to develop. Dry skin is also particularly vulnerable to such irritation. Each aspect of avoiding scratches involves managing these basic root causes.

If you consistently abide by a few simple rules, your horse(s) can enjoy healthy heels. Benefits include easy care, less vet bills and even cost-effective product choices. Here are the principles top grooms live by:

Dry legs. ONLY BONE DRY LEGS and heels should enter a stall. The skin of wet heels is delicate. When the horse walks in bedding, mud or sand, its texture makes the tiny scratches where fungus infiltrates the skin. So, always TOWELL DRY legs to bring out naturally protective oils. Assure legs and heels are ALWAYS totally dry before putting a horse in a stall.

Towel lots. Drying legs vigorously not only reduces vulnerability, but also increases resilience. The pressure, rhythm and friction bring oils to the surface of the skin to strengthen and fortify it. It also increases circulation and gives you the opportunity to inspect legs. So, towel dry vigorously to improve the coat and promote health.

Be gentle. Don't use a stiff brush on heels. It may be useful for cleaning footing and mud off hoof walls, but don't irritate heels with hard bristles or scouring.

Bathe with care. By the same principle, don't use a scrub brush or rubber mitt on the heels. It can make them tender and susceptible to scratches. I suggest using a sponge and your hands to keep heels very clean. If there is crud, work it off gently. I know a very careful horseman and skilled trainer who was seriously injured picking crud off a heel. The horse was so sore it suddenly exploded. He broke all her face bones and several teeth.

Keep clean. Dirt dries out the skin. Think poultice: dirt draws. If legs are kept clean, but not stripped of natural protective oils, heels resist irritation. They are far more resilient to abrasions and fungus. Gently wash heels with your fingertips. Brushes and curries scratch. Don't let heels get too pink. Fungus loves hot heels.



Choose shampoo prudently. Most shampoos are harmful. They use salt (sodium chloride) to make the lather, which parches the skin. They also strip natural protective oils from the coat. Dry skin is not strong. Yet, almost all medicated shampoos ultimately damage the skin. They may eradicate an irritant momentarily, but they leave the skin more vulnerable. You want to use a shampoo that is not only antiseptic but also anti-fungal. To fortify and moisturize the skin, shampoo should be saturated with Aloe Vera with generous amounts of Vitamin E. I also recommend quality Tea Tree Oil. This is nature's most effective and versatile antiseptic. However, there

are 20 grades of the complex compound. So, tea tree oil can be harsh or soothing. Choose look for a shampoo with a *saturation of aloe* and *medical-grade tea tree oil* to treat and prevent scratches. The lack of healthy and effective solutions inspired the Lucky Braids coat care solutions.

Don't shave legs. You see it all the time but this is not a healthy practice. Don't clip leg hair short. While this leaves reduces drying time, it also leaves skin more exposed to the elements and irritants. Trim edges. Towel dry well.

Moisturize for cleaner coats. Truth is, if you don't dry the hair out to begin with, it is easiest to keep clean and bright- *especially greys*. Dry hair is porous and thirsty. So, it gets dirtier. In fact, traditional whitening shampoos and stain removers actually make horses get dirty. Keep coats healthy with vigorous grooming as well as using only enriching products. Coats will not only shine but also stay cleaner longer. If you use an effective and moisturizing shampoo that leaves no film, coats are their brightest. Plus, stains can brush off easily. An enzymatic spray can serve as a quick spot wash or ringside dry wash when necessary.

Troubleshoot topically. If the scratches are already sore, you want a salve to reduce swelling and take away the sting while gently eradicating the irritant and soothing the skin. Your best defense is to also fortify and moisturize the skin. Few products actually promote healing conditions. Most ointments are greasy or oily- which attracts the dirt- the fungus. Plus, they clog pores. So, while they may be soothing, they actually inhibit the healing process. Moreover, they may attract the sun which parches the skin, leaving it at risk. Choose a salve that enters skin readily, without attracting sun or impurities. It should not only soothe skin and break the cycle of irritation, but also leave skin more resilient.

It's simple: be discerning and consistent. Always dry legs well and choose products well. It is much easier to prevent scratches than to treat them. Employ these practices in your daily grooming program to enjoy healthy heels and happy horses.

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