

Story by RUTHANN SMITH

World-Class Groom and Braider



Photo: Gerald Wheeler, Gypsy MVP

Want your horse's feathers to shine? Scrap scratches once and for all.

the Grooming kit SCRAP SCRATCHES

What Is “Scratches?”

Scratches is the condition of crud on heels. It may seem innocuous. However, I have seen those little scab-like bumps lead to legs blowing up to look like stove pipes, turn into systemic infections and even inspire a horse to break the face of a seasoned horseman. Yes, face: bones, nose and teeth. Scratches can get very painful and debilitating if left untreated. The good news is averting them all together is pretty straight forward. Treating them can be too, if you understand a few principles. All horses can have healthy heels with a proactive grooming routine. So, let's consider the causes, proven solutions and prevention.

Scratches are a fungus. After a bath, or standing on wet ground, damp heel skin is soft. Put the wet legs in a stall, and the bedding “scratches” the delicate skin. Mud, sand and footing can scratch damp heels as well. Fungus enters the micro-abrasions. Crud ensues.

Stop Scratches In Its Tracks!

Fungus loves dark, damp conditions. So, feathers

are particularly hospitable. However, clipped socks are vulnerable too. Skin parched and burned by the elements is also very susceptible. So, no matter what, a horse owner's first and most important line of defense is to only put bone-dry legs into stalls or out. If legs are dry, they should not get scratches. Exceptions are if hooves are hot from soundness issues or medications are compromising the horse's immune system.

The best way to dry legs is to use a clean towel to rub them vigorously. This increases circulation and stimulates natural protective oils. Both promote healing. Fans do not. Microfiber drying cloths can absorb up to 30 times more water and ring out to absorb that much more again.

If you are tempted to use a fan or blow dryer, always towel vigorously first and use extreme caution with the cord. Good old elbow grease is your best bet.

Some people finish grooming with a dusting of cornstarch to help keep heels dry. I don't think it necessary if skin is healthy. Other remedies include powder, which may contain talc, a known carcinogen. So, even if you have seen it used, I would not. Others have



Photo: Helen Peppe

Fungus loves dark, damp conditions, so owners should dry legs thoroughly.

been known to throw sawdust into feathers to help dry them, but that could promote scratches. I prefer to towel-dry legs. An enzymatic dry wash spray, pH balanced for horses, can help repel dirt.

Promote Your Horse's Natural Defenses

Your second line of defense is to promote rather than deplete the horse's natural defenses. Groom a lot to stimulate oils, improving the skin's resilience. Keep horses clean. Dirt and sweat parch skin. Do not use shampoo that strips the coat's natural oils. Most whitening, medicated and daily shampoos do. Especially, since they typically contain salt (sodium chloride). Most conditioners just coat hair instead of moisturizing and nourishing it. Tea Tree Oil can be nature's best antiseptic and anti-fungal. However, it is a compound and can vary greatly in quality. To use the fine versus harsh variety, choose products that specify medical or pharmaceutical grade tea tree oil – preferably from Australia rather than China.

If you use the right shampoo, skin will be enriched and fortified. Bathing with a good all-in-one shampoo

should gently kill fungus and clean, as well as be whitening, brightening, detangling, and truly conditioning. Healthy coats resist skin disease and stay cleaner longer. So, you'll save time, energy and money with quality products.

Combating Scratches

If your horse already has crud on its heels, choose the treatment carefully. Conventional scratches medications typically slow healing. Greasy and oily ones attract the dirt that hosts the fungus, as well as the drying sun, while clogging pores. They compromise the skin, inhibiting regeneration. Antiseptic and anti-bacterial soaps do not kill fungus. They just deplete the skin. Some medicated shampoos may kill fungus, if specified, but dry the skin out as well.

While stripping skin can kill the fungus, it only hampers healing, leaving the skin defenseless and prone to scratches. Moreover, dry, dead skin seals in natural protective oils instead of allowing them to be released to replenish skin. Skin needs to be nourished and moisturized to repair itself.

Dirty brushes just push around impurities and spread

skin disease. I recommend washing brushes weekly with an anti-fungal shampoo. Dry them bristle side down, so as not to rot the base.

The best strategy for combating scratches is to first prevent them by being in the habit of drying legs as well as using products that don't parch or suffocate the coat. If you need to treat the condition, come at the problem from every direction: gently kill the fungus, reduce inflammation, soothe, moisturize and fortify the skin. The remedy should absorb quickly, without attracting sun or dirt. A handy salve treatment should do all this to effectively break a scratches cycle. Choosing a progressive all-in-one shampoo can keep you out of the loop with fungus-free, healthy skin. Of course, keeping heels dry is pivotal.

As pervasive as scratches is, it is a management issue. Keeping feathers dry requires some discipline, but the results will save you a lot of aggravation and ultimately reduce your vet bills. So, be mindful. It will save you time and money in the long run. Plus, instead of treating scratches, you can love your beautiful Gypsy horses with big fluffy feathers.

About Ruthann Smith

World-class groom and braider, Ruthann Smith, is on a mission to make it easier to take better care of horses. The Lucky Braids™ products she developed include the award-winning All-In-One Shampoo and Whitener/Dry Wash Spray. Her Lucky Braids Handy Salve has yielded unprecedented results.

Find more information and grooming tips at TopTurnout.com and on Facebook.



This is not a stallion.

Lucky Braids ALL-IN-ONE SHAMPOO



Use for: daily care, anti-fungal, anti-itch, whitening, rich color and big shine. No need for conditioners nor detanglers (comb tails wet). Rinses fast.



Ruthann Smith, world-class groom + pro braider, developed Lucky Braids grooming products + Top Turnout Clinics to make quality care easier.

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