

What is essential grooming for horses?



Grooming means different things to different people and more importantly different things to you and your horse. It also depends



on what area of the horse industry you are a part of as to what is regarded as essential grooming. This article should help you to put some things in perspective and to think about the subject from the horse's point of view as well as the human point of view.

Grooming means different things to you and your horse!

Grooming means different things to you and your horse. In a natural situation horses take care of their own skin. They do this by rolling (which as well as having other benefits helps to remove dead hair and exfoliate the skin), rubbing on protrusions such as a low tree branch

(for the same benefits as rolling) and by mutual grooming. Mutual grooming is where two horses use their front incisor teeth to rub/nip each other to reach the parts of the body that are difficult to reach themselves. This is a literal case of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'. Horses that live outside without rugs also benefit from the wind and the rain which helps to wash out dead hair and skin. As soon as we change the natural order of things, i.e. keep horses separately, put rugs on them etc. then we have to compensate.

Grooming the unrugged paddocked horse

If your horse lives outside in a herd situation and does not wear rugs (and is therefore benefiting from mutual grooming sessions with other horses as well as being able to benefit from rolling and rubbing) then the only grooming you need to do is just before you ride him or her.

Basic grooming involves brushing the whole of the body in the direction of the hair growth to remove mud and dust, picking out the feet and tidying the mane and tail with a brush. You need to make sure that the areas that the tack will sit on the horse are clean and free from any dirt/grit etc. Other than that you only have to do the minimum grooming required to make the horse look tidy enough to ride, but by all means groom your horse as often and for as long as you like if he or she enjoys it. Brushing leaves

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the essential oils in the coat whereas washing (hosing/sponging) does not, so limit washing if your horse lives outside without rugs.

Grooming is also a good chance to look over your horse for any injuries or indeed anything unusual such as lumps, bumps etc. Indeed it is while grooming that a rider may discover that their horse is actually sore in the back for example.

During those times of the year when your horse is shedding their coat you can do them a favour by grooming him or her with a tool especially for the job – such as a hard rubber curry comb etc. Be aware that during grooming sessions some horses may attempt to groom you with their teeth as this is how they tell other horses where to scratch when mutual grooming. You should not allow your horse to do this to you (push their face away gently but firmly), because you could easily end up with an unintentional but still painful nip.



Grooming is a good opportunity to check for sore areas on your horse before riding.

After exercise the sweat can be removed with a wet sponge or a hose (no detergent or a mild detergent). There is no need to wash the whole horse, just the sweaty areas.

After scraping the water off and/or rubbing with a towel the horse can then be put back in the paddock to roll in the dust.



The hooves should be picked out before riding.

A horse that is living outside does not necessarily have to have their feet picked out everyday. It is quite natural for soil to build up in the hooves. Again, just before you ride you can pick out the hooves. Hoof dressings are not necessary and can actually cause problems in a pastured horse as they prevent the hooves from absorbing moisture from the grass (such as the dew in the morning).

For special occasions when you want your horse to look smarter you can wash him or her the day before (but again do not use strong detergent) and put a well fitting lightweight flag (white 'cotton') rug on for the night (in summer). This is far preferable to a horse having to wear a rug all the time just for the odd occasions when he or she needs to look smarter. Or better still wash the horse on the morning of the event and put the flag rug on then. Either way you will find that the horse looks smart enough

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for the day. A healthy horse shines because they are healthy, not from being constantly rugged.

Grooming the confined or rugged horse

When horses are kept on their own (definitely not recommended) and/or permanently rugged (not recommended either) then grooming becomes very important because the horse cannot then take care of his or her own skin. In this case a horse needs daily grooming sessions. Otherwise dead skin and hair builds up and causes discomfort and skin problems. So once a day the rugs should be removed and the horse given a good and thorough grooming starting with a stiff bristled brush (to remove dead skin and hair and to make up for the scratching and rubbing etc. that a natural living horse partakes in on a daily basis) and finishing with a softer brush to remove dust.

Unfortunately in modern stables this is rarely done because it takes time (compared to simply hosing a horse). Aim to fit a daily grooming session in for your horse because a rugged horse needs the stimulation to their skin.

Also remember that your horse *needs* to behave like a real horse and allow them to roll in sand or mud from time to time for the sheer pleasure it brings. This can be done when the horse is sweaty after work. The horse can then be cleaned up and rugged again. In fact a very good tradition in racing stables is to let the horse roll in a sand roll when sweaty after exercise, before cleaning them up and putting them back in the stable or yard).



Remember that your horse needs to behave like a real horse on a regular basis.

If you keep your horse separate to other horses think about why your horse is living in 'solitary confinement'. Is it for your benefit or theirs? A normal horse would never choose this 'lifestyle' and we need to think about what we are doing to modern domesticated horses. Stables were designed for human convenience in a time when animal welfare was not thought to be an issue. In those times horses also worked hard for their living (often for many, many hours a day) and the stable was simply somewhere to eat concentrates and hay and sleep. In modern times horses rarely 'work' for more than an hour a day and if stabled for long periods they can become very stressed. Stables can be improved by allowing horses access to each other over the dividing wall. A good arrangement is to have an area that horses can put their heads over as well as an area that horses can retreat behind.

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Horses that are confined are more prone to hoof problems. The hooves tend to suffer because the horse is standing around in manure and urine. Even in a well managed clean stable the hooves tend to end up packed with manure for much of the time. This means that confined horses are more susceptible to conditions such as thrush in the hooves. The hooves of a confined horse should be picked out regularly (at least once a day) and washed (with water and a mild detergent) from time to time.

Opinions vary enormously when it comes to using hoof oils etc. Unless the horse has a particular problem and your vet/farrier recommends a certain product then it is usually best to leave well alone.

The hoof of a horse is also an essential part of their circulatory system - the hoof has evolved to expand when the horse takes a step and contract when the hoof leaves the ground to 'pump' blood and lymphatic fluid upwards. Horses that are over confined tend to develop 'filled legs' as the lower legs fill with fluid from standing still for long periods of time.

Washing and hosing

Keep in mind that washing and hosing can remove essential oil from your horse's coat. So a horse that lives 'au natural' should not be washed too frequently otherwise the natural water proofing agents in the skin will be removed.

Do horses enjoy be washed? We will never know for sure but where some horses may seem to enjoy being cooled off with water in hot weather they do not seem to enjoy being 'power-hosed' with cold water on a cold day, so keep this in mind. We tend to hose horses because it is quick and easy (compared to grooming). Most horses would probably prefer a good groom because it is closer to what horses do to themselves and each other if given the opportunity, so aim to not overdo washing/hosing and spend some 'quality time' by grooming your horse instead.



This style of stables allows the horses to interact with one another.

Responsible clipping and trimming

Clipping, which is where all, or specific parts of the body of the horse are shaved, is usually carried out in the winter months when the horse has a longer thicker coat. When the horse is worked in the winter months the extra coat causes heavy sweating. This in itself is not too much of a problem; horses are meant to sweat although they would not usually sweat as much as they do from being worked. The problem is that drying the horse is difficult, especially as the weather is usually cold (in winter). Thus the horse can get very cold.

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This horse is clipped along the lower half of the body (trace clipped).

hair loss. If a horse has access the shelter and is only partially clipped then rugs may not be necessary. Certainly through the day when the weather is mild. It all depends on your horse's body type, how much hair has been removed etc.

What is too much?

Trimming the muzzle whiskers, the eye whiskers and inside the ears is should be avoided. The horse needs these important whiskers and hair. The whiskers help a horse to 'feel' (in much the same way that a cat uses their whiskers) and the hair inside the ear helps to keep dust and water out of the inner ear. It is easy to get carried away and trim these important structures but they should be left alone. The problem is anyone who 'shows' their horse (depending on what type of showing (Hacking) they do) will do this because it is a virtual 'requirement'. If you want to partake of such showing classes but feel strongly that it is not right to deprive a horse of these important structures then you could start to lobby. Its time someone did.!

See our publication [A horse is a horse of course \(2011\)](#) for more information about horse behaviour. Aim to be an informed horse owner and think about some of the things that are done to domestic horses.

If the horse lives outside without rugs then he or she must be dried properly before being turned out unless it is still early enough in the day (and the weather is good enough) for the horse to be turned out without risk. So working the horse later in the day in winter, becomes problematic for an owner with an unrugged horse. A healthy horse can cope with cold weather as long as they are dry. Being cold *and* wet (whether it be rain or sweat) means that they can become too cold.

If a horse is clipped then rugs usually become necessary to make up for the



Not all horses are as hairy as this Clydesdale (who is also sporting a moustache!) but the whiskers are important to all horses and should not be removed.

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