



Routinely grooming a horse provides human caregivers a chance to observe oncoming issues that otherwise could be missed

The Right Touch

GROOMING PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES
TO ADDRESS PROBLEMS EARLY

By **AMANDA DUCKWORTH**
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BECAUSE GROOMING IS one of the basic cornerstones of horsemanship, its wide-reaching importance can sometimes be taken for granted. From how much a horse brings at auction to catching critical health issues sooner rather than later, time spent grooming a horse provides innumerable dividends beyond just a clean coat and hooves.

A horse might never undergo as strict a grooming regime as when it is being prepared for public auction.

Heading into the sale season, horses that have been selected to go through the ring typically will be routinely groomed and handled in such a way that they are presented at their best come sale day. A well-behaved horse with a gleaming coat is going to attract more positive attention than one suffering from any kind of skin disease or attitude problem.

In October 2020 the University of Florida published “A Beginner’s Guide to Selling Thoroughbred Horses in a

Public Auction Setting,” as a way to help newcomers understand the complexities that go into a horse auction. One of the key factors, unsurprisingly, is the horse’s appearance.

“The sales preparation process for any horse should begin at least 60 days prior to the sale date and focus on proper feeding, health care, grooming, and exercise; all designed to bring a horse to its peak at sale time,” explained the authors. “Extra care must be given to preparing and grooming the horse to look its best before it enters the walking ring to be sold.

“It is important to note that buyers are extremely attracted to a horse that walks well, and this can have a significant impact on the horse’s purchase price. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that a horse should look its best when it enters the walking ring.”

Beyond the idea of grooming a horse ahead of a sale to increase profitability, routinely grooming a horse provides human caretakers a chance to observe oncoming issues that could be missed if routine welfare practices, including grooming, are not established and maintained.

Animals (Basel) broached the concept of understanding a horse in one’s care in “Determining a Welfare Prioritization for Horses Using a Delphi Method,” which was published in April 2020.

“Welfare issues can arise from the environments in which animals are kept, how they are treated by their human caregivers, and their health,” explained researchers. Using a series of surveys and ranking of equine issues, the research found that in the opinion of equine experts the most important issues for horses are poor disease prevention, old or sick horses not being promptly euthanized, lack of owner knowledge of welfare needs of horses, fear and stress involved in horse use, inability of owners to recognize pain behavior, and obesity and

inadequate feeding practices.

“Prioritizing different welfare issues can help to focus attention on the most pressing or severe issues causing the greatest amount of suffering,” researchers said.

While grooming cannot prevent many quality-of-life issues horses might face, it can tip off an observant caregiver when something has changed about a particular horse. Through routine grooming, which means regularly checking over all parts of the horse, caregivers could notice changes in hair coat, weight, sensitivity to touch, or attitude. All of these can be early signs of impending trouble.

In “Signs of a Healthy Horse,” Dr.



Extra care is given to ensure horses look their best in the walking ring at sales

Tom Lenz explains many of the basics for the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP).

“I tell veterinary students that to recognize a sick or lame horse, they need to look at a lot of healthy, sound horses,” Lenz said. “Horses vary, but

there are signs of general good health that apply to all. A quick evaluation of your horse can be done in less than 10 minutes. Check him daily so you will know what is normal and what is not.”

According to Lenz, areas to pay

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attention to include attitude, appetite, eyes and nose, weight and body condition, hair coat, vital signs, manure and urine output, hydration, and legs and feet.

A horse's hair coat is one of its biggest health indicators. A bright coat is a visible sign of good health that suggests both its grooming and nutritional needs are being met. If a horse presents with a dull coat, often times it is battling a bigger problem, such as a parasitic overload or lack of proper nutrition; it is a good time to reevaluate deworming and feed protocols.

One common skin problem horses face is equine pastern dermatitis (EPD), which is colloquially referred to as "scratches." EPD is not a disease in and of itself; rather, it describes a condition involving skin inflammation of the pastern between the fetlock and the hoof. While horses with feathers are more susceptible to scratches, the painful and unpleasant condition can affect any breed. Most commonly, EPD will be found on the rear of the hind pasterns, especially on non-pigmented skin, but left untreated, it can spread to the front. Common symptoms include swelling, redness, scaling, oozing, hair matting, crusting, and even ulcers.

There are a number of causes, and detecting EPD early is important, as is knowing when to call in a veterinarian. In May 2022, *Schweizer Archiv für Tierheilkunde* published "Owner reported clinical signs and treatment decisions in equine pastern dermatitis."

"This skin condition is difficult to treat, and it is suspected that owners often decide on a treatment without consulting a veterinarian," researchers said. "The objectives of this study were to describe owner-reported clinical signs, severity, and reasons to consult a veterinarian. Moreover, we inquired about preventive measures and treatments (whether) instituted by owners without previous consultation or prescribed by their veterinarians."



Another potential benefit to regular grooming is catching hoof and leg issues such as abscesses, thrush, and various forms of lameness early



MANY DISORDERS AFFECT THE EQUINE FOOT, AND MANY HOOF PROBLEMS HAVE MULTIPLE PREDISPOSING CAUSES.

—RESEARCHERS IN STUDY PUBLISHED IN DECEMBER 2021 EDITION OF *VETERINARY CLINICS OF NORTH AMERICA: EQUINE PRACTICE*

For the study, 123 horses that had suffered from EPD at least once in the previous two years were included. Researchers sent owners standardized questions concerning management,

housing conditions, clinical signs, preventive measures, and treatments. The study found 62% of the horses had shown clinical signs of EPD at least four times throughout their lives, and 92% were actively suffering from EPD during the time of the study.

If owners used a treatment that did not require a medical prescription, they often did not consult a veterinarian. Researchers found that only 9% of topical creams promoting wound healing used by owners were prescribed by a veterinarian. It determined that owners only consulted a veterinarian 32% of the time after the horse began showing signs of pain and lameness.

"Overall, 69% of treatment decisions were made without consulting a veterinarian, making it then more difficult to determine underlying causes for the pastern dermatitis and rendering the treatment often longer and more onerous," researchers concluded. "To raise

owner awareness of possible consequences if a veterinarian is consulted too late in the disease process, specific information campaigns to improve animal welfare should be considered.”

EPD is not the only tricky-to-treat skin condition horses can face. In the AAEP’s “Taking the Frustration Out of Summer Skin Problems,” Drs. Susan White and Lydia Gray examine other conditions commonly found in horses. Ailments such as allergies, hives, insect sensitivities, rain rot, and ringworm can dramatically decrease a horse’s quality of life.

“Skin problems in horses are some of the most frustrating disorders to manage for both owner and veterinarian,” the researchers said. “Skin problems can disfigure a horse, and even



A healthy coat is a visible sign of good overall well-being

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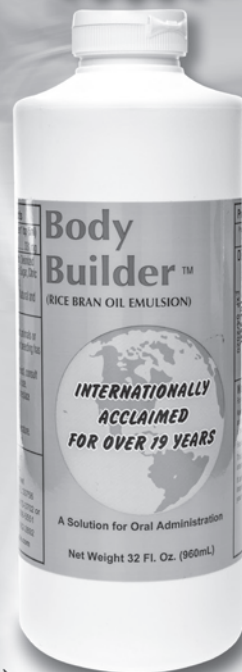
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can cause unsoundness. In addition, many skin diseases, such as allergies, have a complex cause so that one easy treatment is not available.

“Your veterinarian should be an active partner in diagnosing and treating skin disease, particularly one that does not resolve in one to two weeks. By carefully examining your horse and following the progression of the skin lesions, you can help your veterinarian choose a place to perform a skin biopsy—the best diagnostic procedure for troublesome or persistent skin disease. Once a diagnosis is made, specific therapy can then be recommended by your veterinarian to resolve the condition.”

Another potential benefit to regular grooming is catching hoof and leg issues such as abscesses, thrush, and various forms of lameness early. In December 2021, *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Equine Practice*



YOUR VETERINARIAN SHOULD BE AN ACTIVE PARTNER IN DIAGNOSING AND TREATING SKIN DISEASE.”

—DRS. SUSAN WHITE AND LYDIA GRAY IN THE AAEP'S “TAKING THE FRUSTRATION OUT OF SUMMER SKIN PROBLEMS”

published its review “Other Clinical Problems of the Equine Foot.”

“Many disorders affect the equine foot, and many hoof problems have multiple predisposing causes,” researchers said. “Surgery may be necessary after conservative management

has failed. Diseases of the hoof capsule may seem simple, but their effect on performance can be long-lasting and healing is often prolonged. Diagnosis of problems within the hoof capsule is enhanced with the use of computed tomography and MRI.

“The prognosis of fractures has improved with strategic placement of lag screws across fracture planes using aiming devices and advanced intra-operative imaging techniques. Collaboration between the clinician and a skilled farrier is important for successful management of hoof disorders.”

Regular grooming also will alert horse handlers to any changes in ocular or nasal discharges. While it is perfectly normal for a horse to have small amounts of clear liquid in its nostrils, excessive mucus is cause for concern. Similarly, a horse's eyes should be clear, open, and clean. Unusual discharge or a cloudy appearance is a sign it is time to call the veterinarian.

A case report in the July 2021 issue of the *Journal of Equine Veterinary Science*, “Gigantic Ocular Squamous Cell Carcinoma Mixed With Fibrosarcoma in a Mare: Clinical, Laboratory, Ultrasonography, and Histopathology Findings,” highlights the importance of early treatment.

A 10-year-old mare had a one-year history of a left eye tumor that led to complete vision loss. She presented with a large, ulcerated mass oozing blood, her left parotid lymph node was swollen, and she had a sinus tract discharging pus. Enucleation, which is the surgical removal of the entire eyeball leaving behind the lining of the eyelids and muscles of the eye, was decided upon as the course of treatment, but the mare died just after examination.

“Ocular neoplasms represent 10% of all equine neoplasms, and ocular squamous cell carcinoma is the most common one,” explained researchers. “The ocular mass was excised, and its weight was 390g. Postmortem examination revealed no



Grooming and baths provide valuable bonding time



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distant metastasis in all internal organs.

“Despite the unsuccessful outcome in this particular case, this report documents a mixed eye neoplasm, highlights the ultrasonography and histopathology features of OSCC, and reinforces the need for early diagnosis and surgical treatment in such cases to improve the outcome and to decrease the drastic complications and mortality.”

An ocular case report in *Veterinary Ophthalmology* in July 2019, “Fluoroscopically guided neocanalization for treatment of nasolacrimal atresia in two horses,” had a happier outcome for a yearling Thoroughbred colt and an 8-year-old Saddlebred mare. In the report, both evaluated for persistent mucoid eye discharge.

“Examination of both horses re-

vealed copious yellow-tan mucoid ocular discharge with a negative Jones I test, absent nasal punctum, and unsuccessful anterograde nasolacrimal duct (NLD) irrigation,” explained researchers. “Clinical abnormalities were present on the right side only in one horse and bilaterally in the other. Computed tomography (CT) with contrast confirmed nasolacrimal duct atresia in both horses.

“Under general anesthesia, the affected NLD was catheterized antero-grade and contrast injected. Using fluoroscopic guidance, retrograde access to the distal NLD was obtained for through-and-through wire access. Over the wire, the stoma was dilated and a temporary stent placed for four to eight weeks. After the procedure,

both horses were comfortable and free of ocular discharge at the minimum time of last follow-up, nine months postoperatively.”

Ultimately, horses are always going to find ways to injure themselves, but daily care and a set grooming routine can help those in charge be aware that trouble might be brewing.

While grooming might seem like a boring necessity, it provides valuable bonding time as well as time for inspection of all parts of the horse. This, in turn, means the caregiver is better in-tune to what is normal and abnormal for a horse, both in terms of its physical condition and its attitude. All of this combines to improve a horse’s overall quality of life in addition to helping it achieve a shiny coat. **BH**



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