

RUTGERS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

NEW JERSEY AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION

FS347

November 1988

Grooming Horses Safely¹

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Grooming is important in maintaining the health and happiness of your horse. In the wild, horses groom each other as well as rolling at will and rubbing against trees to maintain healthy skin. Domesticated horses must rely on humans to provide the opportunity for skin care. Grooming, no matter who does it (horses or humans) increases the circulation to the skin which then releases the oils that provide luster to the horses coat.

Horses that are frequently worked, for whatever purpose, should be kept properly groomed at all times. A shiny, healthy coat does not develop overnight. It takes daily grooming over a long period of time to achieve the supple coat of a winner. Daily grooming also eases the burden of the shedding season by removing the hair gradually.

As well as providing a shiny coat, regular grooming also enables one to notice any abnormalities on the horse. Abnormalities such as cuts, irritations, or fever can be detected and treated, during a thorough grooming session. Horse safety when grooming relies on common horse sense; not only **knowing** the Dos and Don'ts, but actually **practicing** them around the horse. Before you do something you might regret, imagine the worst possible scenario and decide if it is worth taking the risk. Following are a few common horse sense practices:

- Do not jump around, move suddenly, or behave nervously around horses. All of these actions result in a nervous horse that is unsafe to work around.

- Hard-toed shoes or boots should be worn when working around horses. One of the most common horse-related injuries is having ones feet stepped on.
- Always let the horse know what you intend to do. Quick, sudden movements startle horses and should be avoided.
- Keep all equipment away from the work area, unless it is being used at the moment. This prevents the horse from stepping on it, playing with it, or chewing on it, as well as preventing you from accidentally tripping on it.

Figure 1 lists the names and purposes of some common grooming tools. All grooming equipment is safe. It is dangerous only when used improperly or in rough hands. Once you have a grasp of the purpose of each tool and how to use it, grooming is easy.

THE GROOMING PROCESS

Start grooming on the near or left side of the neck and work towards the rear of the horse. Areas that have few muscles and bones near the surface, such as the face, legs and hips, should be groomed carefully and gently. Stand near the horse as you groom it. Make fluid, not quick jerky movements that are likely to startle the horse.

Do not hurry the grooming procedure with a young horse. Let it become accustomed to the tools and their

1. This document is FS347, a series of the Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Publication date: November 1988.
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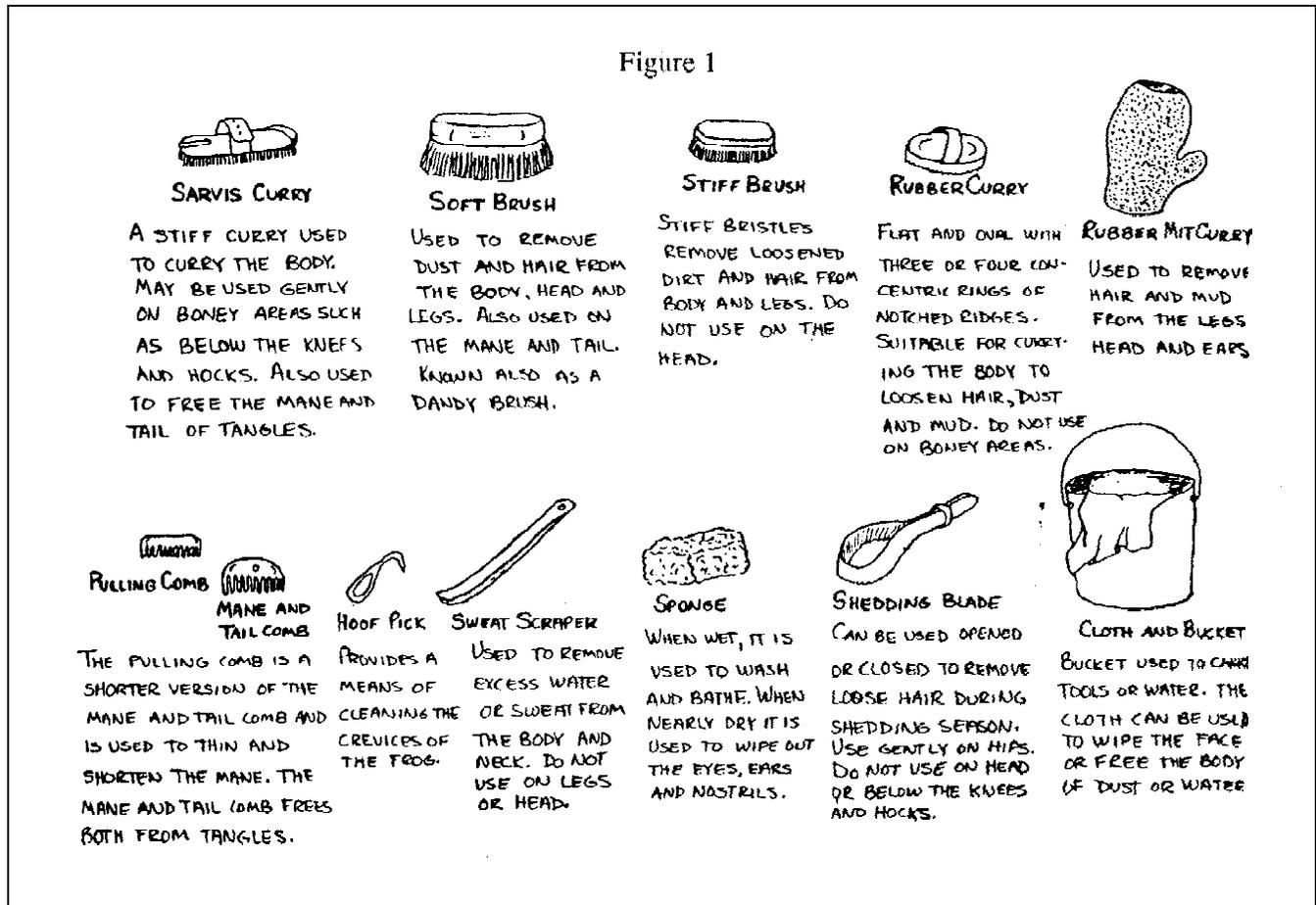


Figure 1.

uses.

When changing sides, either walk far enough away to avoid getting kicked, or stay close to the horse's rear quarter with a hand on the rump, to break the momentum of the kick. Never step over the lead rope or crossties (which should not be low enough to step over anyway). This puts you in a very dangerous position should the horse panic and pull back on the rope. Never crawl under the horse's belly. Even the most docile horse can spook and step on you.

The grooming process begins with currying. The purpose of currying is to loosen caked-on dirt and to bring dust and dandruff to the surface for easy removal. Either a Sarvis curry or a rubber curry may be used. Start currying at the neck and firmly brush the hair in circular movements while working towards the rear. Pay particular attention to areas you cannot see such as the belly and underline, between the legs and behind the ears, because they are often forgotten. Vigorous circular movements when currying increases circulation to the skin. This, in turn, leads to healthy skin. By releasing

the skin's natural oils, the coat also takes on a healthy shine. Be careful not to curry too vigorously on bony areas, and do not use any curry comb on the face. A rubber curry mit should be used on the bony areas and the face. With the mit, pressure can be applied to remove dirt and hair without injuring the sensitive areas.

Brushing with a stiff body brush should follow currying. Brushing returns the hair to its normal position and removes the dirt brought to the surface by currying. Brush with short, firm strokes not long fluid strokes. Long strokes only move the dirt from one area to another while short swift strokes flick the debris off the horse. Brush with the grain of the coat. While brushing with one hand, hold the curry in the other to clean out the brush every few strokes. Do not use the stiff brush on the face. Remember to brush the belly and underline. Be aware that some horses are ticklish there and may become fidgety. During fly season, particularly, a horse often thrusts its hind leg forward to chase flies from the abdomen; therefore, it is wise to keep your head and body out of striking range when working in that area.

Follow the stiff brushing with a brushing with a soft brush. This second brushing removes the dust left by the coarser, stiff brush and brings oils to the surface, giving a lustrous shine to the horses coat. The face can also be brushed with the finer, soft brush. Before grooming the head, untie the horse and hold it by the halter. With a soft brush start at the forehead and move down the face, brushing with the grain of the hair. Avoid the eyes. Be gentle around the nose and mouth. Some horses are sensitive or ticklish in these areas and may try to move their heads to avoid the brush.

When grooming the legs, bend at the hips or remain in a squat position. Do not sit on the ground or rest one or both knees on the ground. These are committed positions, which means once in them, it takes longer than a split second to get out of them. In committed positions, if the horse should become frightened, the time it would take you to move away from scrambling feet and the chance of becoming seriously injured is increased. It always helps to have your free hand resting on the horses body while working on the legs. This way you can feel the muscles tense up and be warned that the horse is about to panic.

Do not try to scrub wet mud off a horses legs. Scrubbing wet or muddy legs may lead to grease heel or other forms of dermatitis. Muddy legs should either be allowed to dry and then cleaned with a curry or stiff brush, or hosed off and then allowed to dry.

Always pick a horses feet out each time you groom it. The task is made much easier if you square the horse before you attempt to clean its feet. Start with the left front foot and work around the horse, ending with the right front foot. For each foot, face the rear of the horse. Do not reach for and grab the foot hurriedly. Slide your left hand down the forearm. Many horses will lift their foot once you reach the ankle. If not, then gently squeeze the tendons above the ankle. If necessary, lean into the horse while squeezing the tendons. This will place it off balance causing it to lift its foot. As the horse raises its foot, slide your hand around to the front of the ankle and raise it to knee height.

Do not try to hold the foot if the horse struggles. Release the foot and start again. Do not let the horse have the last word or it will become increasingly more difficult to maintain a hold on the foot.

Once you have the foot in hand, pick out the crevices around the frog as well as the frog itself (Figure 2). Always pick from heel to toe. Using the pick from toe to heel could result in an injury to the frog if the foot

is jerked from your hand with the hoof pick caught in the crevice.

Do not stick your face too close to the foot when you clean it. A quick jerk could result in a painful blow to the head.

Watch the position of your feet. Make sure they are off to the side of the horse to avoid being stepped on when the foot is jerked out or released from your hand. Gently release the foot. Do not drop it.

The hind feet are picked up the same way as the front feet. When you move to the right side of the horse to clean the right feet, hold the feet with your right hand and pick with your left.

Grooming the mane and tail differs according to the breed and use of the horse. For most hunters and stock horses, the mane and tail are brushed with either a Sarvis curry or a mane and tail comb. A horse with fine, thin hair that falls out easily should have its mane and tail groomed frequently with nothing more severe than a soft brush and the knots separated with ones fingers to limit hair loss. Burrs and knots should not be combed out. Rather pull hairs away from the burr or knot until it is free. This method prevents excessive hair loss. When brushing the tail, always stand to the side of the horse. Do not stand directly behind the horse.

A pulling comb is used to shorten and thin a mane and forelock. Never use scissors to shorten the mane or forelock. To shorten a mane, first comb out the mane. Grab a **small** section of long hairs and push the remaining hairs back with the comb. Wind the small section of long hairs around your fingers or the comb and pull them out quickly and straight down. If you feel

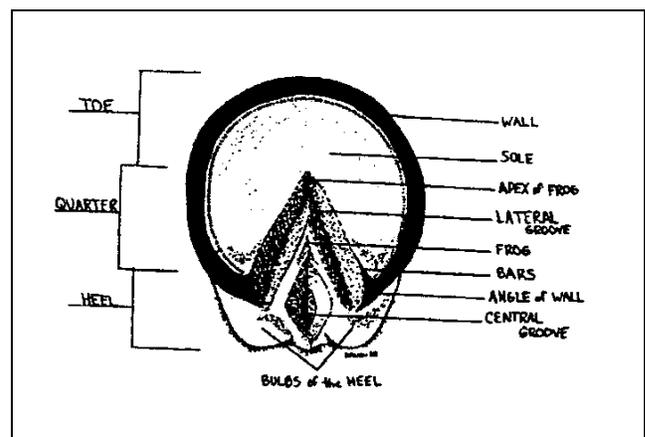


Figure 2.

a lot of resistance when you pull, you probably have too much hair in the section. Make sure the hair is pulled out from the roots and is not just breaking at the ends. If this happens, the mane will be short, but thick and hard to manage. To most horses this is not painful, but some horses are sensitive in this area and may present a problem.

Remember to clean the eyes, ears and nostrils with a clean cloth or sponge. Also check and clean, if necessary, the anus, vulva or sheath, and between the teats.

Fly season can be a very annoying time for your horse. You can lessen the irritation by spraying your horse with fly spray. Spray from the same positions you used to groom him. Do not spray directly on the face. Put some liquid in your hand or on a cloth and rub it on. Many commercial fly wipes/sprays are available. Select one that fits your needs.

Always clean all tools before putting them away. For safer stable hygiene, it is better to have a set of tools for each individual horse if possible. This lessens the possibility of transmitting communicable organisms from one horse to another. If it is not possible for each horse to have its own equipment, then infected horses should have their own set and the remaining tools shared among the other horses. Once the infected horse overcomes the ailment, whether it be mange, lice, ringworm, or rain rot, the tools should be disinfected before being used again.

If at any time, while you are working around the horse, the horse refuses to stand still and begins to shove you, reprimand it immediately by voice commands and a firm push to let the horse know that this behavior is undesirable. Eventually the horse will learn to move on voice commands only. Never punish a horse in anger because the punishment may be too severe. Never strike a horse in the head or kick its legs.

When horse sense is used, grooming is safe and easy. Take the time to groom the horse properly and you will be amazed at the results. With a clean, well-groomed horse at hand you can now saddle up and enjoy the day.