

Hoof Coatings: Using Them For Better Feet

Identify what you're trying to address before you choose your dressing

There are many hoof-care products available today meant to be applied topically as dressings, coatings, sealants and hardeners. Some are formulated to promote faster hoof growth. Some are used to soften dry, brittle feet to make them more flexible and less prone to cracking while others are intended for hardening to keep feet from becoming too soft in wet conditions. Some aim to do both — by keeping the natural moisture in and excess moisture out.

Hoof Moisture Issues

The hoof wall is made of connective tissue — similar to skin, but much harder, more like human fingernails. Like fingernails and skin, hoof horn (which is made up of tiny hollow fibers) must contain a certain amount of moisture to remain resilient and pliable.

Too much moisture and the horse's feet become soft and wear away quickly or won't hold nails. Too little moisture and they become brittle — chipping and cracking. Years ago horsemen used grease or wool fat (lanolin is still the active ingredient in some hoof ointments) to keep feet from getting too dry and as a moisture-repelling barrier to keep them from getting soft. In recent years hoof hardeners and sealants have become popular, utilizing modern technology and materials.

You can't add moisture to a hoof with a topical dressing since hoof moisture comes from within — from a healthy blood supply — but a good hoof coating can help reduce moisture loss by holding in the moisture that's already there. The hoof's natural protective coating, the waxy periople protecting the outer surface, is sometimes damaged by environmental

conditions. A hoof dressing can serve as a temporary coating to minimize moisture loss. The hoof dries out when moisture evaporates through the hoof wall faster than it can be replaced.

Using Sealants

A hoof sealant can help feet that have tiny surface cracks caused by continual moisture changes. Hoof sealants keep external moisture from damaging the hoof, keep internal moisture from evaporating and counter the effects of environmental changes.

Examples of such changes are a pasture that's alternately dewy and dry, or feet that get wet from daily bathing, then into stall bedding such as wood chips or shavings that dry the hoof horn.

Mud that dries on a hoof pulls out natural oils. Urine in stall bedding contains ammonia, which breaks down horn tissue. A good hoof sealant can protect the hoof, but you may need to try several products to find one that works best for a particular horse's feet and conditions.

Follow label directions for proper application and frequency of use, since products contain different ingredients that affect the tissues in different ways and some stay on the hoof longer than others. Some can be toxic to horses or humans if used improperly.

Hoof sealants are generally products that should be used only on the hoof wall and not the coronary band. There are two classes of modern hoof sealants — those containing methyl cellulose (found in fingernail polish) and those containing urethane (a tough and flexible polymer).

Cosmetic Products

Many people who show horses use some type of cosmetic product to make

the hoof look clean and shiny.

Other products are intended for use on sole, frog and heel bulbs to help harden and toughen these tissues and prevent bruising and soreness.

Some racehorses, endurance horses or horses ridden continually in rocky terrain develop sore soles and may benefit from products that toughen the soles or products that help form a living pad over the bottom of the foot. These products generally contain ingredients that should not be spilled onto the skin or coronary band.

Conditioners

Hoof conditioners, by contrast, are generally intended for use on the coronary band and hairline to stimulate hoof growth and healthy hoof walls. These dressings or ointments often contain some type of oil or lanolin. Some are referred to as moisturizers. Some can be used on the sole, frog and heel bulbs.

Some products are advertised as aids to help keep feet healthy, as a natural hoof moisturizer, designed to maintain the natural moisture level of the hoof and fill old nail holes — and prevent fungus from entering the hoof. Several hoof-care products contain essential fatty acids and natural moisturizers, such as avocado oil and glycerin, to help prevent cracks, splits and contracted heels.

Some products that are used on the bottom of the foot to stimulate more growth and thickening for thin soles can also be used on the coronary band for hoof growth.

With such a wide array of products available, for a variety of purposes, it pays to read labels. You may also want to ask your farrier for advice on which products might be best to try for your particular horse's feet. **Q**

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