

The essential 7

Discover why regular checks of these seven vital areas are essential to your horse's wellbeing – and could reveal important clues about his health and fitness

Words Andrea Oakes

When time is tight, a quick flick-over with a brush should leave your horse ready to ride. But what about the fiddly bits that often get forgotten? Taking good care of these more awkward areas will not

only keep your horse comfortable but could reveal vital clues about his general health.

Our top-to-toe guide will tell you all you need to know about these more sensitive areas – from how and why to tackle the ticklish parts, to when to leave well alone.



OUR EXPERT

JANE KING

is an equine vet who deals with a full range of horses and ponies – from Thelwell-types to racing Thoroughbreds – at the Westmorland Veterinary Group in Cumbria, which is a member of the XLVets group.

Eyes

Essential care As vet Jane King points out, your horse's eyes are "very sensitive and precious" - good reason indeed to make regular eye care part of any grooming routine. But there's more to dealing with the delicate eye area than diving in with a damp sponge. In an effort to clean them, you may in fact introduce germs or push foreign matter further into the eyes.

Where possible, avoid touching the eye area at all. If you do need to remove a little discharge from the corners, wipe gently, away from the eye, with a clean, soft and lint-free cloth. Use a separate piece for each eye and dispose of the cloths afterwards - a far better option than having a germ-infested sponge knocking around in the grooming kit.

Jane points out that the feelers, or whiskers, around the eyes do an important job.

"They help your horse see in the dark and feel for objects," she says. "If you trim them, you'll remove his ability to do this. This may be OK if he's stabled, but think twice if he goes out."

Common problems "Flies around the eyes can cause irritation and introduce infection in summertime, so use masks and fringes or stable your

If you need to remove discharge from his eye, wipe gently with a clean, soft cloth



KEEP HIS EYES SAFE

To protect your horse from eye injuries make sure his stable and field are as safe as possible. Make sure any sharp edges on troughs, buildings, pipes or other obstacles are covered or inaccessible and knock in any nails that may be protruding.

horse to prevent this," advises Jane. "Eyes can also be sensitive to sunlight, perhaps because of uveitis or inflammation, causing squinting and watery discharge.

"If the tissues or skin swell because of an allergic reaction to pollen, your horse may rub one or both eyes on his legs or haynet and suffer self-inflicted trauma," she adds. "It's also possible for a small object, such as a hay seed, to get lodged behind the third eyelid, causing soreness and weeping.

"Eyelids are susceptible to growths such as sarcoids and tumours, so look out for swellings and monitor their development. Greys are particularly prone to melanomas, while tumours are more common in those horses,

such as albinos, who have no pigment around their eyes."

Call the vet "Eyes are easily damaged, so if his eye seems painful or your horse is holding it closed, he needs veterinary attention," says Jane. "Yellow or green pus around the eyes can signal an infection that needs treating, so ask your vet if you're worried. And if you look into the eyeball and it's so cloudy you can't see in, this means your horse can't see out.

"Eyelids are crucial to cover and protect the eyes. Any cuts or tears must be treated properly and stitched - if the eyelid becomes scarred and won't close completely, the eye can dry out."

Ears

Essential care A soft brush or towel is best for ears, used gently on the outsides from base to tip. The insides are usually self-cleaning, so you'll need to do little more than wipe them very carefully to remove dust or dirt. You can clean off any wax clinging to the furry interiors but never be tempted to excavate further by sticking anything down the ear holes.

"Some people trim the ear hair for showing, but be aware that this will reduce natural protection if your horse is out over winter," advises Jane.

Common problems Flaky or scabby skin on the outsides of the ears can have several causes.

"Sweet itch can extend to the ears," Jane explains. "Crusty skin can also be due to rabbit fleas or biting flies or midges - you might

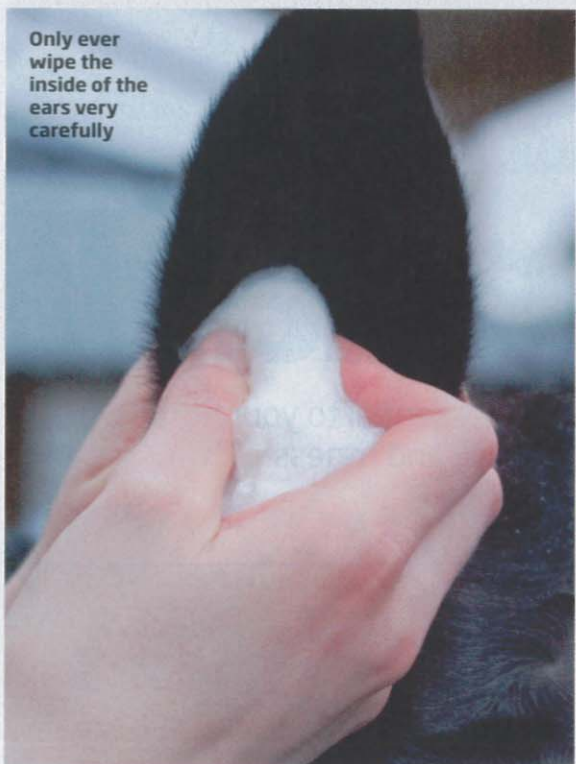
see spots of blood on your finger as you wipe the ears. Use a fly mask with ears if necessary."

According to Jane, inner ear infections and ear mites are both rare in horses. Pale-coloured, cauliflower-shaped growths inside the ears could well be aural plaques, a type of skin reaction thought to be aggravated by black flies.

"Plaques can cause sensitivity in some horses, but generally they're best left alone," she says.

Call the vet "If one of his ears is drooping or your horse is tilting his head to one side, he may well have an inner ear infection which needs treatment," advises Jane. "In very rare cases, really crusty ear tips can be a sign of systemic illness elsewhere in the body that causes the blood vessels to die. Call the vet if you're concerned."

Only ever wipe the inside of the ears very carefully



Muzzle

Essential care The velvety skin on the muzzle and lips is particularly thin and packed with nerve endings, so use only the softest brush or cloth to remove mud or dust from this sensitive area. Small amounts of discharge can be wiped carefully from the nostrils, but use separate sponges to avoid cross-contamination between the two or with the eyes. A damp, disposable cloth or some quality kitchen paper is a more hygienic option.

Here, too, the whiskers perform an important function, allowing your horse to judge distance and helping him to distinguish between food textures. Some owners remove them for cosmetic

'Only use the softest brush to remove mud from the muzzle area'

reasons, while others leave whiskers intact to allow the horse full use of his sensory capabilities.

Common problems "A horse with no pigment in this area will be susceptible to sunburn or buttercup irritation," says Jane. "Use a factor 50 sunblock to prevent sunburn and be aware that the area may be painful if you're tacking up or fitting a headcollar.

"Small cracks or cuts on the corners of the mouth should heal quickly unless you keep repeating



The velvety skin on the muzzle is particularly thin and packed with nerve endings

the trauma," she adds. "You can use something like Bonjela, but give his mouth a rest if the injuries are caused by biting."

Call the vet "Excessive nasal discharge can be a reflection of problems lower down in the respiratory tract," says Jane, who advises seeking advice if the discharge is thick, yellowy or persistent. "Photosensitisation of the muzzle, where pale skin areas become severely sunburned and blistered, can be a sign of problems

in the body, typically in the liver as a result of ragwort poisoning."

The gums are also a health indicator. A very pale colour can indicate anaemia or blood loss, while a vivid yellow can point to liver problems.

"Horses who graze on certain pastures can develop yellowed gums from pigments, which is different from jaundice," says Jane. "The inside of the mouth should be pink and healthy, but it's important to know what's normal for your horse."



BLOCKED NOSES Horses can only breathe through their noses, not their mouths, so never pack anything in their nostrils to stop a discharge or nosebleed.

Chestnuts

Essential care The horny chestnut on the inside of each leg can be peeled off if it begins to protrude. Try softening them first with a little oil or Vaseline if they're particularly tough.

"Chestnuts can grow very long in heavy draught breeds and your farrier can trim them down to skin level if necessary," advises Jane. "They shouldn't bleed as they're just horny tissue."

Common problems "Certain conditions that affect hoof growth can cause abnormal chestnuts, but this is very rare," says Jane.



The chestnuts sit on the inside of each leg

Feathers

Essential care While some horses produce little more than a few excess silky hairs on their heels, certain native or heavier breeds can be seen sporting an abundance of below-the-knee feathers.

Trimming or clipping them can neaten the appearance, but feathers are better left intact if your horse winters out. Brush them out regularly, as long as they're completely dry, so you can examine the underlying skin for redness, scurf or scabs.

On heavier legs, take special care to examine folds in the skin where infections can develop. It's OK to wash legs with warm water every day or two, but make sure they're properly dry before your horse goes back out.

Your farrier can clip the ergots, the small horny protuberances found on the heels, if they become too long.

Common problems Continual soaking of the lower legs can weaken the skin's natural defences and allow bacteria to enter through tiny nicks and scratches, resulting in mud fever. As difficult as it may be in winter, 'clean and dry' is the key to prevention. "Historically, horses roamed on dry plains," says Jane. "They weren't designed to stand in mud."

"Heavier horses and some cobs are predisposed to mallanders, a thickening of the skin below the knee on the front legs and above the fetlock on the hindlegs. Watch out, too, for heels mites or chorioptic mange. The mites are invisible to the naked eye but can make the horse stamp his feet as he tries to relieve the irritation."

"Take special care of white legs, which are more prone to mud fever, infection and photosensitivity."

Call the vet Mud fever can be



tricky to treat and a severe case may require antibiotics. Mallanders, mites and mange require more than an over-the-counter treatment, so consult your vet for advice.

ABOVE: Once mud has been washed off, his legs must be dried properly

Mane and shoulders

Essential care The condition of your horse's skin, mane and tail will mirror his internal health, so take a look at his diet and exercise routine if his mane isn't exactly his crowning glory. To care for the mane, use your fingers to detangle knotty areas before combing the hair gently. Avoid excess washing and always use a shampoo especially designed for horses to avoid stripping the mane of its natural oils.

The best time to pull or trim the mane is after exercise when the skin is warm and the pores are open. Removing too much hair will reduce your horse's ability to

cope with the elements if he's turned out.

Common problems "Itchiness along the mane can be caused by lice in winter and sweet itch in summer," advises Jane. "You might see the lice moving about or spot their pale-coloured eggs stuck to the base of the hairs."

Rubbing caused by sweet itch or ill-fitting rugs can occur in the mane and shoulder area. Ask your vet about the latest developments in sweet itch relief and try a quality hood lined with silky material in areas prone to chafing, or a 'bib' designed to prevent rug rubs.

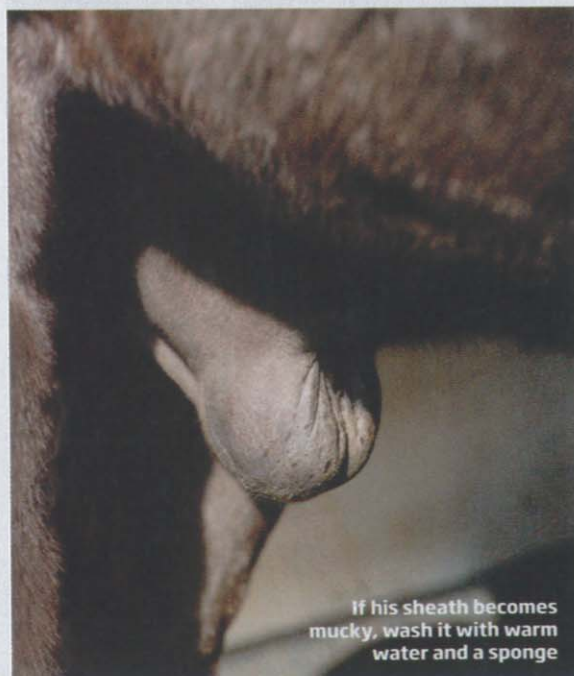


Check for itchiness and rubbing in the mane



A bib can be used to help prevent shoulder rubs

Check your horse's sheath area during your daily groom for signs of swelling



If his sheath becomes mucky, wash it with warm water and a sponge

Sheath and dock

Essential care The areas around the sheath and dock should need little attention. If you spot a build-up of dirt around the dock, soften it with a little baby oil so it can drop off naturally or clean it with a sponge or a baby wipe. If the sheath becomes very mucky, Jane advises washing it with warm water and a sponge. "Geldings can suffer from an accumulation of secretions in the sheath pocket known as smegma," she explains. "This can act as a constant irritation, leaving him predisposed to squamous cell carcinoma."

Common problems "A swollen sheath is usually because the horse is too fat and not moving around enough, although excess swelling might indicate circulatory

problems or, more rarely, an infection or tumour," explains Jane. "A horse with lice or sweet itch will rub the top of his tail, whereas with pinworm he might try to put his tail over a fence and rub the dock area."

According to Jane, these areas are also prone to growths.

"Sarcoids tend to appear where the flies go, especially around the sheath," she adds. "Melanomas are often seen under the dock, especially in grey horses, but these are usually slow-growing and relatively benign."

Call the vet Jane says: "Ask your vet to take a look at any discharge or lumps, bumps and warts. If a horse is struggling to urinate and you see staining on the inside of back legs, he'll need veterinary attention." 🐾