



Three different causes and treatments for scratches in horses

by Dr. Madalyn Ward (DVM)

Every horse owner dreads seeing the scaly, oozing sores that are typical of scratches in horses. Pastern dermatitis is the official name for this frustrating syndrome that causes such misery for horses. It would be so great if there was a simple, effective treatment that worked in all cases but such is not the case. Here are the treatments most effective for the three most common causes of scratches in horses.

Cause number one for scratches in horses:

Extended wet weather - The skin is the body's first level of protection against external pathogens or toxins. Any extended period of wetness will break down the protective properties of the skin. Wet skin combined with constant contact with mud or manure is the perfect environment for bacterial and fungal infections. Even if your horse is not actually out in the rain, high humidity, that slows the drying of the skin after sweating or bathing, can be a setup for scratches in horses.

Treatment for scratches secondary to extended wet weather - Clipping long hair around the affected area is important. Clipping will allow air to reach the skin and dry it more quickly. Clipping also makes it easier to apply medication to the skin. Keeping the area dry is an obvious treatment but not always easy to do. You can't keep the rain from falling, but you can avoid bathing your horse if he is prone to scratches. Instead of bathing, mix up a 30/70 mix of liniment, such as Sore No More and water and sponge sweat off your horse's body and legs. The liniment will have a dual purpose of adding oils back into the skin and acting as a mild antiseptic. Avoid washing or applying any water to the areas with scratches. Instead, gently brush off scabs and apply a drying powder such as Desitin.

Nutrition can play a key role in helping your horse avoid scratches or recover more quickly if affected. Vitamin A is important for the health of the skin. Fresh, green grass is one of the best sources of Vit A,

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due to its high levels of beta carotene. Alfalfa hay is another good source of beta carotene that the horse's body converts into Vit A. The Vit A content of hay will diminish the longer it is stored so try to buy late in the season when putting in your winter supply. Blue green algae such as spirulina or AFA is another great source of beta carotene that is made into Vit A.

Fatty acids are important for skin health. You want sources of fatty acids that are high in omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids. Such sources include flax seed, chia seed, coconut oil and blue green algae.

Cause number two for scratches in horses:

Extended dry weather - Have you ever noticed how chapped your lips get when the humidity is very low. Very low humidity will cause the skin to become dry and cracked. Any crack in the skin creates an entry point for pathogens or toxins. Scratches in horses can occur when the weather is dry but there is dew on the grass in the early morning. The early dew softens the skin briefly but when the skin dries it becomes chapped and irritated. The grass gets dry and prickly as the morning progresses and the dry grass and twigs scratch the skin causing additional damage, allowing bacteria to set up infection.

Treatment for scratches secondary to extended dry weather - In the case of scratches in horses during dry weather you are best to leave the hair on the area so it can provide some protection. If the affected area gets messy you can clean it with warm, soapy water and then apply an emollient type dressing, such as Ichthamol. Avoid using any strong antiseptic that will further irritate the skin.

Nutritional needs are the same for scratches occurring in wet weather since your goal is to keep the skin well-nourished and healthy.

Cause number three for scratches in horses:

Leaky Gut Syndrome - Damage to the intestinal lining is a more common reason for skin lesions than is often realized. Here is how this works. If the lining of the gut is damaged then incompletely digested food particles are able to get into the bloodstream. Normally, foods are broken down into single proteins that don't trigger any type of immune reaction and only fully digested protein is able to pass through the intestinal wall. When the larger proteins of incompletely digested foods pass through the damaged gut wall they act as antigens that trigger an immune reaction. When the immune system determines that an antigen represents a threat, it attacks it with antibodies. It is the immune

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antigen/antibody complex that creates an inflammatory reaction in the small blood capillaries of the skin.

A horse with scratches secondary to a leaky gut will have skin lesions that persist in any weather condition. Once a horse with a leaky gut develops a sensitivity to a food, eating that food will cause inflammation in the skin. You will want to test your horse for food allergies and avoid those foods as you work to heal his gut.

Treatment for scratches secondary to Leaky Gut Syndrome - Healing the gut is the best treatment to get rid of this form of scratches. You have to decrease inflammation, protect the gut lining and allow it to heal. Step number one is to decrease the inflammation in the gut. I like a **product that contains enzymes, turmeric and blue green algae extracts**. I start with just 2 capsules a day but increase up to 6 if needed to see improvement.

Once the inflammation is controlled, the body can focus on healing. **Gastro Plus Pro** will help protect and heal the gut by increasing the circulation to the gut wall so it can produce more mucous for protection. In addition I give 2 capsules of a **product** that stimulates the body to produce healing stem cells. Once the lining of the intestine is healing you can introduce **good bacteria, antioxidants and blue green algae**.

In summary:

The three most common causes of scratches in horses are:

- Extended wet weather
- Extended dry weather
- Leaky gut syndrome

The steps for treating scratches from wet weather are:

- Clip off long hair
- Keep the area dry and clean

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- Apply a drying agent to the affected area
- Feed foods high in beta carotene and quality fatty acids

The steps for treating scratches due to dry weather are:

- Leave hair unclipped
- Wash area with mild soapy water
- Apply emollient dressing
- Feed foods high in beta carotene and quality fatty acids

The steps for treating scratches due to leaky gut syndrome are:

- Test for and avoid foods showing sensitivity
- Decrease inflammation in the gut
- Protect the gut wall
- Stimulate the healing of the gut
- Repopulate the gut with good bacteria

Scratches in horses is not an easy condition to treat. Prevention is best achieved with good nutrition and management.

[One treatment we found helpful at Horrell Hill Equine Wellness Center is to spray the scratches with beneficial Microorganisms.

For Leaky Gut syndrome feeding CoolStance without grain additions is highly recommended, as CoolStance is low in sugar and starch (NSC).]

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