



POULTICES, LINIMENTS  
& TOPICAL APPLICATIONS  
– **HOT OR COLD TREATMENT?**

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**What do you reach for when your horse is injured or has worked so hard you want to provide him with some relief? We are spoilt for choice at the shops with the likes of lotions, clays, oils, muds and gels and its easy to get confused as to whether you need to provide “warmth,” “cooling heat,” “a cool, soothing sensation” or just “relief for sore muscles and overworked tendons.” Is your aching, tired horse really benefiting here?**

We were always taught that liniments are designed to provide temporary relief for minor aches and pains, often associated with over-worked muscles and a liniment’s active ingredients would typically generate heating or cooling effects. Poultices usually provide temporary “cold” therapy for inflamed tissues and are commonly clay-based. Most Vets will tell you that both cold and hot therapies have their place in veterinary medicine as sometimes a horse benefits from a little bit of both.

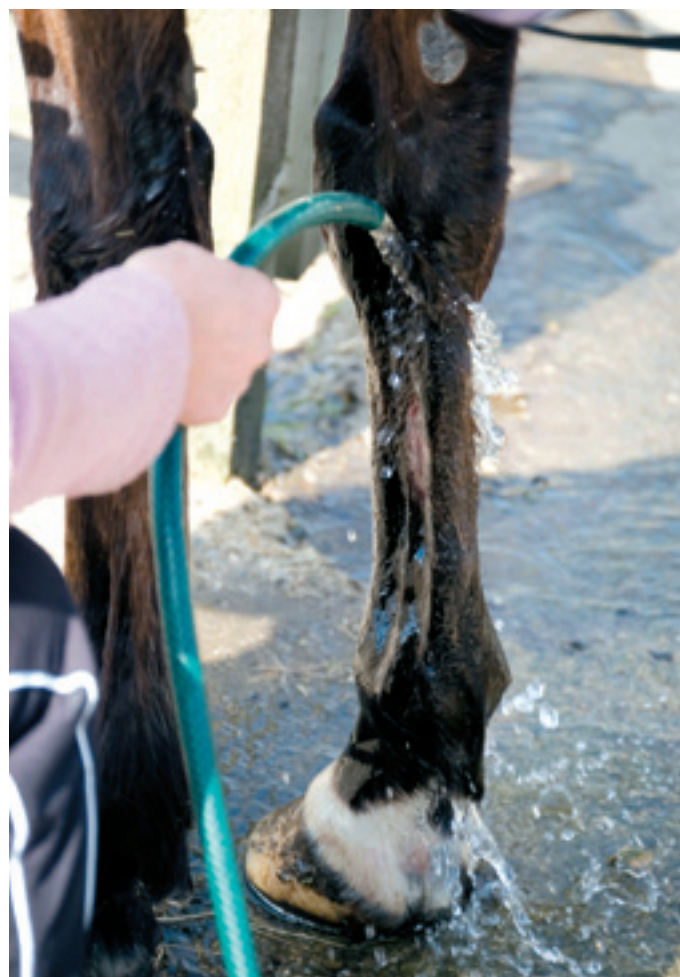
Before you could buy anything and everything for horses from a shop, we relied on good old cold treatment for fresh trauma or injury and as a preventive therapy after heavy work - sometimes standing for hours with the hose running on horses’ legs. Cold lessens inflammation and is a pain reliever - by reducing the initial inflammation, the risk of further injury from excessive swelling is lessened. Many beach-trained racehorses are walked in the sea to cool their legs before heading home. We would use heat treatment for arthritis and older “set” injuries that were cold to the touch.

Water and/or ice are the preferred cold therapy with poultices being another option to cool things down. They are typically made of clays - Kaolin (white clay) and Bentonite (clay from volcanic ash) plus Glycerine and are frequently used as cold therapy on the lower legs (tendons, ligaments, joints) and hooves (traumatic injury, bruises, abscesses) to reduce swelling/inflammation and therefore aid healing.

Dimethyl Sulfoxide (DMSO) is a by-product of the chemical solvent industry and is commonly used by horse owners and Veterinarians to relieve swelling and inflammation in old musculoskeletal and joint injuries. When used topically, it causes moderate to intense heat - a benefit in treating old injuries that are still swollen but firm and cold to the touch. However, putting DMSO on a “fresh” injury increases the heat in that area and can actually increase inflammation. Wear rubber gloves or apply DMSO with a paintbrush, since it is rapidly absorbed by deep tissues - in humans and horses alike. Always check with your Vet before using DMSO. It acts as a carrier agent, with anything on your horse’s skin (i.e. dirt and bacteria) carried into the bloodstream, it can be irritating and some horses will stamp their feet and even rub and chew treated areas. Never use on an open wounds.

You need to be aware of why HOT and/or COLD is crucial, when you have purchased one of the cooling topical agents on the market – as it will go on “cool” but then, when you apply wraps, the wraps naturally WARM the legs. So, be aware of what you want to apply – hot or cold.

Usually, a Liniment is a liquid or semi-liquid preparation that is applied to the skin to provide pain relief. Many are marketed as “topical antiseptics,” meaning they are generally safe to use on superficial scrapes thereby helping to prevent infection. Some antiseptic liniments are also designed to provide temporary relief for muscular soreness, stiffness or swelling caused by overwork or exertion.



However, if a liniment is being advertised as a topical analgesic, it’s not designed to be used on open cuts or wounds - no matter how superficial. These liniments contain pain-relieving ingredients that cause heat or cooling effects when applied for sore muscles and arthritic joints but can really sting on open wounds. Menthol, eucalyptus, capsaicin (made from chili peppers), camphor and mint oils are common ingredients found in topical analgesic liniments. These products are used to help “warm up” a horse before a workout and can be used after exercise to relieve sore muscles, especially the large muscles on the back, shoulders and loin. Always read labels - some warn against liniment application under saddle areas before riding to avoid skin irritation and scurf problems.

Some people swear by sweat wraps for old injuries. They are designed to reduce fluid build-up in the lower legs and are accomplished by applying liniment, cellophane wrap and then a cotton bandage. They trap heat so never use as first aid for “new” injuries. Besides traditional liniments, substances that are commonly used to “sweat it out” include DMSO, nitrofurazone ointment, petroleum jelly, glycerine or glycerol and mineral oil.

As with any health care issue, if you are unsure, it’s always a good idea to call your Vet who can then determine if there’s a cause to be concerned about.