

TIPS FOR **THICKER** TAILS

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Whether your horse's tail is its crowning glory or a problem that has you tearing your hair out, a healthy, glossy and well-kept tail as a contribution to the 'overall picture' cannot be understated. A good, thick and even tail is a reasonably reliable sign of good health in your horse.

There are many theories when it comes to the proper way to care for a horse's tail. One is very important: no matter what breed you ride; no matter what discipline you pursue, your first rule should be that of gentleness. Tail hair is extremely fragile, much like long human hair. Allow plenty of time if you plan to clean, comb or plait your horse's tail. Never rush and most certainly never yank.

Nothing can enhance the quality and quantity of a tail as effectively as regular care and management. When you first attend to grooming it, always use your fingers to gently work loose knots and separate any clumping or rolled hairs before taking to it with a brush or comb. This eliminates unnecessary hair breakage. While doing this, check the horse's dock to ensure everything is in good health. Hair worn off and broken around this area often indicates either worms or a skin irritation. Also use this time to look for ticks. You should, in fact, do this daily, whether stabled or at pasture, and especially if your horse grazes with cattle nearby.

Using a comb should only be done lightly, to fluff up the tail after having thoroughly worked it through with your fingers. Combs tend to be difficult to use without breaking hairs. Always hold the entire tail firmly bunched in one hand, whilst working your way upwards from the very bottom. Pull the tail into sections and only move up a few inches at a time to ensure that the entire length is properly groomed. A good tail brush is preferable and will give the same finish with far less loss, using the same method.

Using tail bags is a great time AND tail-saver. However, be aware that plaiting a tail and keeping it in a half-bag, may set waves or 'kinks' in the hair, which usually needs a wash to be removed. The best option is a full-bag, secured to the cover, most conveniently with Velcro. If your choice is a full-bag, it is important that you ensure it has been manufactured from a natural 'breathable' fabric if you are proposing everyday wear. Bags made from synthetic fabrics often restrict airflow around the horse's dock and, in some cases, a lot of tail can be lost.

Mares have some special grooming needs. Because their tails can be in the line of fire, so to speak, when they urinate or are in season, mare's tails require some extra care to keep them looking their best. Damage from urine and other exposure can leave a tail brittle and bleached. Try washing and conditioning the tail, then soaking the damaged sections in white vinegar. Note; that it is wise to first, do a test on the inside of her leg to make sure she has no adverse reaction to vinegar. This treatment will help remove any mineral build-up and will close hair cuticles so they will be less prone to absorbing damaging substances in the future. Be aware that a badly damaged tail may require a few cycles through this process.

As always the best results come from within. You may wish to consider using a high quality, nutritional supplement designed to accelerate hoof growth and improve the quality of the hoof horn. Hair and hoof are made of similar materials, so it is no surprise that this remedy also positively affects hair growth and condition.

Banging a tail (cut blunt) at a level - no lower than the point of the fetlock (when the tail is relaxed - hanging its longest) is a smart and sensible look. If you are tempted to let the tail grow longer than the fetlocks, remember, that if a horse steps on its tail when getting up from rolling, it invariably pulls out large, long hunks. When a tail is too long - that's how it gets thin in a hurry!

Owners preparing for the show ring should always consider the visual advantage of showing the horse's hocks off to the judge. For this to be done correctly, the horse's tail needs to be held in an arc, simulating the natural tail carriage of being ridden. This can be simply done, by placing your arm under the base of the tail and allowing it to drape over your arm and down the back of the horse's legs. To smooth each hair, you should move your hand down the tail and then stop just before reaching the ends. All the hairs will be about the same length through the body of the tail and you can trim the excess. Once this extra ridden carriage length is allowed for, the tail can be banged off accurately at the point of the hind leg chestnuts, thus creating a fuller, thicker appearance. You should never trim too much at a time; you can't replace what you have cut off, but you can always trim more if required. And ALWAYS remember: never leave a tail bandage on overnight or for an extended period of time.

Keeping your horse's tail clean is very important. Ticks are attracted to dirt and product build-up, which can also make the hair more susceptible to being snagged. A sizable portion can be pulled out with just a flick of the tail! If this happens, or rough handling causes the hairs to break off, then you are going to have to live with the mistake for a while. With only a few inches growth annually, it can take a long time for a horse's tail to regenerate. There are so many great products on the market for cleaning and protecting tails. You need to find the best quality mane and tail specific shampoo that fits your budget. Fortified with proteins, moisturizers and emollients to clean down to the skin; pH-balanced to create body, manageability and shine, good tail shampoos and conditioners are your best tool in making life easy! Be sure to rinse out all soap residues from the base of the tail. Soap residues can irritate the skin and your horse will probably rub itself on anything it can find, damaging those luxurious locks! Finally, a quick dusting with a detangling or polishing spray to finish will enhance your efforts and keep the tail soft and manageable, while also repelling dust for a little longer.

If the refined appearance of a pulled tail is something you desire, be aware - overzealous pulling can diminish the way a tail looks for quite a while. A once-attractive tail can turn into a thin, ragged one quickly with excessive pulling. To pull the tail correctly, work your fingers through the tail to feel the column of square-ish tailbones. Then part the hairs by running a comb down either side of this column. Leave the ones directly over the tail untouched and the ones on the other side can be thinned for a neater, more polished appearance.

Take a small section of hair at a time, approximately half an inch. Hold onto the longer ones and tease the shorter hairs back. Then wrap the short hairs around the comb and pull in one quick, short motion. Never work on one area too long because you will run the risk of pulling too much. Move to another section after removing a few stragglers. You can always return to take out a few more hairs if you are not satisfied with the overall finished effect. A good suggestion is; that you do a little each day until the action is perfected.



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False tails are an invaluable tool, where allowed. If you are not certain, it would be wise to check with your trainer as to whether they are an enhancement you can utilize in your chosen discipline. When attaching a false tail, the most essential goals are security and invisibility. There is nothing to gain from having a beautiful tail that suddenly drops to the ground or has an opposing swing that makes its falseness highly obvious! Spread the hair at the back of the dock bone, go up one and a half inches from the bottom of the dock and take 3 sections for the plait. Once you have put the loop of the false tail through one of the plait sections, continue plaiting down a further one and a half inches, at least, before placing on rubber band to secure. Best to use two rubber bands for extra security. If you are dubious about your attachment lasting through the day, you might also choose to finish with a couple of stitches with a strong needle and thread for insurance. Once you have fitted the tail the first time, subsequent attachments need to be leveled in the same position to keep the tail length accurate. Trim the false tail if necessary. If you attach the tail at the bottom of the dock, there will be a sway and the false tail will not move in harmony with the horse's natural tail, making it obvious to all. With a false tail, it is important to let the horse get used to it. A sensible practice is to attach the tail and ride in this a few times before a show. Let the horse get used to the feel; you don't want them running away from the tail in the ring! Occasionally overlooked, you may be surprised just how your horse's appeal can be improved, starting at the tail!