

Essential Oils and Your Horse's Skin Problem

By Frances Fitzgerald Cleveland

"I have tried everything on my horse's skin problem and nothing works!" Have you ever uttered these words or heard someone say them? I have, many times, and my first response is "Have you tried essential oils?"

Why are some skin problems so complex to heal? Your horse's skin is a very complex organism. It is a horse's largest organ, ranging from 12 - 24% of his weight, depending on age. There are three major layers that make up your horse's skin. These various cellular and tissue components consist of the *epidermis*, *dermis* and *subcutis*.

The outermost layer of your horse's skin is the *epidermis* and it is avascular, meaning it is lacking of blood vessels. This is the layer where you will find the major epidermal appendages, such as hair, hair follicles, sebaceous glands and sweat glands. Note these appendages also extend down to the dermis.

The *dermis* is the thickest major layer and provides the skin with most of its bulk. It is made up of connective tissue fibers which consist of 90% collagen, which is the major protein constituent of the dermis, and 10% elastin, which provides the skin with its suppleness and elasticity.

Finally, the third and innermost major layer of the skin is the *subcutis* also called *hypodermis*. The subcutis is composed of fat cells and thin strands of collagen-containing connective tissue. Within this layer the nerves and blood vessels supplying the skin weave their way through the strands of connective tissue to reach the dermis that lies above it.

This intricate composition of cells, tissues, chemicals, blood, nerves and energy is simply called skin. Yet, it has one of the most important jobs of the horse's body - protector. Your horse's hair provides mechanical protection and acts as a filtering system and insulator. The superficial layer of the epidermis with its highly developed, tough, durable, flexible membrane acts as a chemical and waterproofing structure. The skin provides protection from the sun's rays and it regulates your horse's temperature through its sweating mechanism. The skin communicates the well being of your horse's health. It is an important sensory organ that provides information about the conditions in our surrounding environment.

Horses can be confronted with a number of skin problems due to the surrounding environment or stress on the immune system. They may encounter bacterial skin diseases, such as rain rot or scratches, also known as dew poisoning. There are fungal skin diseases such as ringworm. Horses also suffer from warts (a viral skin disease) and parasitic skin diseases such as mange (scabies), lice and midline dermatitis. Some horses suffer from saddle sores, sarcoids (benign skin tumors), dandruff, photosensitization, itchy skin and allergic skin reactions, such as hives and sweet itch (an allergic reaction to the bites of tiny insects belonging to the genus *Culicoides*, *midges*, *no-see-ums*).

Essential oils have the ability to heal these skin problems. Because of their small and simple molecular structure it is easy for them to pass through the skin. Essential oils enter the body through the skin via the ducts of the sweat glands and hair follicles. The skin produces its own sebum (protective layer of oily wax) and essential oils absorb readily into fatty substances; therefore they absorb readily into the sebum. Once through this layer they enter the blood stream and pass through the rest of the body. Thus, the healing process begins.

When working with essential oils and skin problems you want to look for oils with certain skin healing properties. The properties to look for are:

- Cicatrisant (healing agents for burns, cuts, scars) examples are Lavender, Helichrysum, Tea tree, Rose, Neroli, Frankincense, and Geranium
- Analgesic (deadens pain): examples are Lavender, German Chamomile, Roman Chamomile
- - Antiseptic: examples are Lavender, Helichrysum, Tea Tree
- Anti-inflammatory: examples are German Chamomile, Roman Chamomile, Lavender and Yarrow
- Vulnerary: (an agent that helps heal wounds and sores by external application) examples are Tea tree, Lavender
- Fungicidal: examples are Patchouli, Helichrysum, Tea Tree

The oils listed above have notable healing effects on skin problems. When working with essential oils you should consider the quality of the oil and safety factors. If used sensibly and by following the correct professional guidelines, essential oils present little risk. It is important to acquire high-quality oils from a reputable supplier. Your oils should always be diluted into carefully formulated, appropriate blends. If these guidelines are followed, then safety concerns such as skin irritation, sensitization, and oral toxicity can be avoided. When working with essential oils you should always consult your veterinarian about the condition you want to treat and consult a certified aromatherapist who is knowledgeable about and experienced with essential oils.

I have had success with two essential oil products regarding skin problems. Pete's Equine Remedy, a mixture of quality essential oils in a base oil of Apricot Kernel Oil and water, comes in a spray bottle. This product works on all types of skin problems. People have used it on sarcoids, scratches, rain rot, dermatitis, sweet itch, stitches, minor scrapes and mange. Pete's Equine Remedy also takes the itch out and promotes hair growth, therefore helping with over rubbed manes and tails. The other product is called Wound Salve, a mixture of essential oils in a seaweed/aloe gel base, and it comes in a two-ounce jar. This product heals minor and deep wounds. People and veterinarians who have used these products have commented that what they like about both of them is they work and that they heal from the inside out.

Essential oils are a viable alternative to treating skin problems. When used properly they can treat the skin problem both internally and externally with just a topical application. So the next time you think or hear, “Nothing works,” remember there may be an essential oil to the rescue.

This article is for informational purposes only and is not intended to replace veterinary or professional care.