

Equine Health Experts Raise Concerns Over Chemical Ingredients in Horse Care and Leather Tack Products

Veterinarians and equine specialists point to sodium-based detergents, petroleum solvents, and synthetic compounds as risks to horse health and tack.

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-- As awareness of ingredient safety grows across the consumer and pet care industries, equine health advocates are drawing attention to a largely overlooked concern: the widespread use of harsh chemical detergents, petroleum-based solvents, and synthetic compounds in products applied daily to horses and their leather [tack](#) in the guise of [Horse Care](#).



Strength and Beauty

“

if you would not be comfortable with an ingredient on your own skin, why would you apply it to an animal's skin?”

Laura Robinson

petroleum distillates and silicone polymers, the equine care industry has relied heavily on synthetic formulations — often with little scrutiny of their long-term effects on animal health, skin integrity, or the durability of fine leather.

The Problem with Detergents and Sodium-Based Shampoos

Sodium lauryl sulfate, the foaming agent found in the majority of horse shampoos, is a known surfactant that strips the natural oils from skin and coat. In humans, SLS is increasingly avoided in premium personal care products due to its association with skin irritation, barrier disruption, and sensitization with repeated use. In horses — whose skin is significantly thinner and more permeable than human skin — the risks are compounded.

Repeated washing with SLS-based shampoos can strip the horse's coat of its natural sebum layer, the protective oil barrier that regulates moisture, resists environmental irritants, and supports healthy skin microbiome function. The result is a coat that may appear clean and shiny immediately after washing but becomes progressively drier, more brittle, and more susceptible to dermatitis and fungal conditions over time. Sodium chloride (salt), used as a thickener in many commercial shampoos, presents additional concerns — particularly for horses with sensitive skin or those being bathed frequently during competition season.



Horse Washing

Petroleum Distillates and Silicones on Tack: A Hidden Cost

The leather care category presents a parallel concern. Tack — saddles, bridles, reins, and girths — represents an overwhelming, significant investment for equestrians, often running into tens of thousands of dollars for quality pieces. Yet the products most commonly used to condition and protect that leather frequently contain petroleum distillates and silicone polymers that, over time, work against the very material they claim to protect.



Saddle & Tack

Petroleum distillates penetrate leather fibers and can leach the natural oils that give leather its suppleness and tensile strength. Silicone-based conditioners create an occlusive surface film that blocks the leather from absorbing subsequent nourishment — leaving it looking conditioned while slowly drying from within. Repeated application accelerates cracking, stiffening, and structural degradation of stitching and hide. Equine leather care professionals have long noted that tack treated exclusively with petroleum and silicone-based products tends to become brittle and prone to failure faster than leather maintained with natural wax and oil-based treatments.

What Naturally Derived Ingredients Offer

Carnauba wax — harvested from the *Copernicia prunifera* palm — forms a breathable, protective layer on leather surfaces that repels moisture without sealing out air. Unlike silicone, it does not build up into an occlusive film and does not interfere with the leather's natural aging process.

Beeswax, used in traditional saddlery and leather care for centuries, penetrates the hide to nourish and condition from within, restoring suppleness without leaving a greasy residue. It is non-toxic, non-irritating, and safe for incidental contact with both horse and rider.

Botanical oils — including Aloe Vera, which closely mirrors the molecular structure of natural sebum — offer deep conditioning for both leather and animal coats without the barrier-disrupting effects of synthetic detergents. For horse coat care, plant-derived cleansing agents can clean effectively while preserving the natural oil balance that commercial shampoos routinely strip away.

A Critical benefit is naturally derived ingredients do not off-gas volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and they do not require protective equipment during application. Equally important they do not accumulate as persistent residues on skin, coat, or leather over repeated use.

A Standard the Equine Industry Has Been Slow to Adopt

Consumer product categories from food to skincare to pet care have undergone significant ingredient scrutiny over the past decade. The equine care industry — despite serving animals whose welfare is a central concern for millions of dedicated owners — has largely lagged behind.

"The same question we ask about any product going on skin applies here: if you would not be comfortable with an ingredient on your own skin, why would you apply it to an animal whose skin is even more sensitive?" said Laura Robinson, founder of Equine Skys, a surface care company with decades of experience formulating with naturally derived ingredients. "The equine world deserves the same ingredient transparency that consumers now expect everywhere else."

Equestrians seeking to evaluate their current product choices are encouraged to review ingredient lists for sodium lauryl sulfate, petroleum distillates, silicone polymers, and synthetic fragrance — and to explore naturally derived alternatives for both horse care and leather tack maintenance.

More information on naturally derived surface care formulations is available at www.equineskys.com.

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