

Conquering Mildew in Leather

by Anna Carner Blangiforti, President & Founder, Leather Therapy Products

Oldwick, NJ--Mildew has a distinctively prickly, earthy odour. You open the tack room door or lift the tack trunk's lid and your nose tells you mildew is there before you ever see the powdery grey to blue or grey green coating on the leather.

Mildew is one of those good news, bad news affairs. On one hand, mildew's presence means there's still some life in your leather. On the other hand, it's a sign that destructive moulds are at work among the leather fibres. Unchecked mould can also eat away at stitching, weakening the strength of any sewn tack parts.

Unfortunately, once mould spores get a toehold in your leather, completely removing them is almost impossible without damaging the leather itself. Under a microscope, the twisted tangle of leather's fibres resembles a network of fine plant roots. Anything strong enough to completely penetrate this tangle and kill every mould spore could harm the fibres or the bonds between them as well. The leather's structure and strength would be comprised.

Protecting your leather tack from all contact with airborne mould spores is an impossible goal. However, you can discourage those mould spores from reproducing in your leather and minimize smelly, unsightly mildew on your tack by cleaning, conditioning, and storing it properly:

- Choose leather care products with a neutral pH to preserve the leather's internal structure.
- Clean leather after each use with products that lift dirt without clogging the leather's pores or building up in stitching lines.
- Condition periodically using emulsified conditioning products. Emulsions contain millions of microscopic oil droplets suspended permanently in water. The liquid emulsion carries the oil droplets deeply into the leather fibres without leaving that greasy or waxy residue where mildew loves to breed.
- Choose leather products containing ingredients that inhibit growth of mould and mildew. The only EPA tested and approved product that meets this criteria is Leather Therapy Restorer and Conditioner.
- Store leather in a dry location that is not subject to temperature extremes of high heat or freezing cold (this means most attics, basements, garages, and car trunks are poor storage sites).

Cleaning your tack after every use helps prevent the build up of dirt and sweat that provides an ideal breeding ground for bacteria and moulds. Leather cleaners or conditioners that leave a soapy, greasy or waxy residue behind in stitching lines, crevices, and leather pores only contribute to this fungus-friendly environment. Make sure to separate sweaty saddle pads from your tack before storing.

You can find books describing old home remedies that advocate mild solutions of water and either household bleach or rubbing alcohol to stifle leather mould. While it is true that either one is a disinfectant capable of killing moulds, they can also damage hide proteins, dry out the leather and remove dye to change the colour of your leather if used aggressively enough to really target mould spores deep within the leather.

You may need to take extra steps to control the humidity level in the place you store your tack, especially if you live in a damp climate. Try a bag of desiccant crystals that absorb excess moisture in your tack room. A single light bulb left on in a tack closet may provide enough heat to keep the air dry and mildew at bay. For large tack rooms, look for special low wattage bar heaters sold for large storage closets and pianos.