

Wool in the Washing Machine?

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If sheep don't shrink after a rainstorm, why are so many riders terrified at the thought of washing wool? Natural wool's springy, crimped fibres provide superior cushioning on the undersides of saddles and in saddle pads. Those tiny crimps create millions and billions of microscopic air spaces that enable wool to wick away moisture.

Wool retains its wicking ability even after it is spun into yarns then woven into pads, wraps, blankets and coolers. All those little air pockets also explain a woollen paradox. Wool provides warmth because those air pockets insulate. But those pockets also allow air to circulate freely, dispersing excess heat rather than holding it against the skin.

Wool finds its way into horse equipment as sheepskin (the wool is left on a tanned hide), as combed fibers anchored to a woven or knit base fabric, as dense felt, or as yarns knit or woven into various products. Here is where those fears of washing come in. Riders are afraid to wash woven or knit wool fabrics because of shrinkage.

They are afraid to wash sheepskin because of its marriage of leather and wool. Sheep don't shrink in the rain because water alone does not shrink wool. It is a combination of hot water and agitation that does the deed. In fact, manufacturers produce wool felt by agitating thick layers of wool fibres in hot water until they shorten and lock tightly together.

So riders should not be afraid to wash wool as long as they use the right techniques. Obviously, twisting wool horse goods around the agitator in a washing machine filled with hot water is not the best cleaning technique for wool. But you can hand wash most woollen horse items or you can use your washing machine like an oversized salad spinner and let it handle some of the labour. Choosing a cleaning product appropriate for wool is a very important first step.

Look for a pH balanced washing products like Leather Therapy's laundry solutions with added emollients that prevent natural fibres like wool or leather from drying, and that is formulated to rinse clean leaving no irritating residues. Avoid regular laundry detergents. Detergents tend to be very alkaline which is why they lift dirt and clean so well. However, their harsh pH can dry out the wool, stripping the natural lanolin oils that give wool its soft feel and lustre.

Perfumes in laundry products or alkaline residues that don't rinse out completely can also create allergic skin reactions in some horses just as they can in people with sensitive skin. Then next step before you wash any wool saddle pad or blanket is to test in an inconspicuous place to be sure that dyes are not going to bleed. Particularly test reds or any woollens you suspect are made of hand-dyed yarns which may be less stable.

Now set the washing machine for the gentlest cycle that provides the least agitation and fill the tub with cold water. Add a capful of your wash product and immerse the pad or blanket. Agitate gently for only a minute or two. Then stop the machine and just let the item soak. How long the item soaks will depend on how dirty it is. Gentle hand rubbing may be needed for crusty sweat or deeply embedded manure stains.

After soaking, agitate for another minute or two, then spin out the wash water. Follow the same agitate-soak-agitate-spin sequence with a tub of clean rinse water. Lay items flat or hang them on a line to dry.

Sheep can also take baths without ruining their wool or their hides. To wash sheepskin-lined galloping boots, the underside of your Western saddle, or a thick felt pad, remove as much dirt as possible with a stiff-bristled brush first (be careful not to brush felt so hard that you raise a fuzzy nap). Now swish a capful of Leather Laundry Solution & Rinse & Dressing into a bucket of water.

These products are both patented by Leather Therapy Products/Unicorn Editions, Ltd. and will go a long way to protect fibre, fleece and leather -- easily.

Dip a rough textured towel or soft brush and gently remove any remaining dirt. Use a clean towel and plain water to rinse, then, let the wool dry. The same technique works on a sheepskin or even reindeer saddle pads. When you buy a sheepskin saddle pad, however, check the manufacturer's hang tag.

Again, use cold water and limit agitation. After washing, treat the skin-side while it is still damp with a light coat of a non-greasy leather conditioner (Leather Therapy Rinse & Dressing) that duplicates the fat liquors used to lubricate the leather during the tanning process. As the leather dries, it will draw the lubricant into its fibres to keep the leather soft and pliable.