

Head Care and Breaking in a Natural-Hide Head

The drum builder will probably provide instructions on how to care for and how to break in a head. ALWAYS follow those directions.

Natural heads are skin. During dry winters drum heads can suffer just as human skin does. You MAY wish to apply a small amount of a good quality moisturizer to the exterior of the head. The operative words are “small amount” and “good quality.” Don’t use a cheap watery product.

Here are some options for treating the drum head.

1. Many players use a product called “Dubbin”. It’s a leather conditioner. It’s not all that easy to find outside of the western states and Canada. It is available through Amazon.com. Visit the Dubbin website for more information: <http://www.pappysdubbin.com/products.html>.
2. I use anhydrous, pharmaceutical grade Lanolin on my drum head. Lanolin is the oil extracted from the wool of sheep. Lanolin is available on line from Australia. My supplier is Koru Naturals <http://www.korunaturals.com/>. It costs about \$9 for a two ounce tin. It is unlikely you would ever need more throughout your entire playing life! Some players use Lexol leather conditioner (NOT leather *cleaner*). But, for the money, I like pure lanolin better.
3. Some players use shea butter on drum heads. Shea butter is the fat extracted from the nut of the African shea tree. Shea butter is not difficult to find. But, make sure you get shea butter and not a compound or lotion that just contains shea butter.

No matter what moisturizing product you choose, be sure to use a *small* amount and rub it into the head thoroughly. Make repeated applications. How much is enough? A rule of thumb is when the head will not accept any more conditioner, that is when you can no longer rub in even a small amount into the head; you have put enough into the skin. Don’t be afraid to rub vigorously and hard. You may feel the friction in your fingers and the drum head may heat up and slacken. That’s okay. A warm hide will accept the moisturizer better.

The interior of the drumhead can benefit by the occasional application of a *small* amount of talcum powder. This helps your hand to slide around and reduces the noise of movement.

If your drum is new and has a natural head, the exterior may seem rough and scratchy. Some heads even have hair left on them!! If the head is rough and scratchy, lightly sand the head using fine grit sandpaper. Fine grit sand paper is vital. **DO NOT** sand on the edge of the head where it wraps into the frame. Only sand in the middle of the head where you will play. You don’t need to get any closer than about an inch away from the frame of the drum. Sand in small circles around the head. A final sanding with 400 grit sand paper, or even 600 grit, will polish the head. Clean away the dust and then apply a small amount of moisturizer.

If you have a custom-made drum, the builder has probably prepared the head. It is unlikely that you will need to do anything to the head. DO NOT break out the sand paper on a drum costing hundreds of dollars. You might ruin the head!!! **Always follow the builder’s instructions** about head preparation.

If the drum has a bleached and treated head, it’s probably ready to play. **DO NOT** sand the head or apply any conditioner. **Follow the instructions of the maker.**

More about the bodhran at this link: www.billtroxler.com

The best way to break in a new head is to play the drum. This will polish the surface, make the drum easier to play, get rid of any scratchy sound and improve the voice of the instrument.

If the drum is tunable, don't over tension the head. A bodhran is supposed to have a low voice. Get the high pitches by momentarily applying pressure to the head with the hand inside the drum.

Beware of heat. In a hot car or sitting by a sunny window, a bodhran head can tighten up a lot. It is possible for a head to split when subjected to extreme heat. Always slacken the head if you will travel in the heat of the summer. Humidity will cause a head to slacken. A slack head can always be tightened.