

Sheath Cleaning

Sheath cleaning isn't really a fun job for anyone involved. But after the first time, you'll realize there's not much to it.

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As a horse owner, you've no doubt come to realize that there are three topics guaranteed to raise the eyebrows of your nonhorsey friends and relatives: 1) Flushing fly eggs from your horse's eyes, 2) the productive effects of deworming agents, and 3) cleaning your gelding's sheath.

Each of these subjects can bring polite chatter down to a hushed silence at Thanksgiving dinner or a wedding reception. But the idea of cleaning your gelding's sheath can make even seasoned horse owners blush. It's such a, well, sensitive concept to some people: getting that up close and personal with your male horse.

Get over it. Here are the blunt facts: Your gelding has a penis, it's encased in a sheath, and to prevent irritation and infection it needs to be cleaned at least once every six months. There. Now that we've confronted the subject, here's advice on how to tackle this touchy task.

The Bare Facts

The sheath surrounding the penis is also called the prepuce. The sheath is formed by a double layer of sliding skin, with the internal layer containing sebaceous glands that secrete lubricating oils. These secretions, together with flaking skin cells, form a thick, waxy material called smegma. Because smegma collects in the folds of the sheath, it needs to be periodically removed or it can be a source of infection.

Another reason for regularly cleaning your gelding's sheath is to look for any swellings or lesions that might require treatment. Here are several of the most common:

Summer sores. These are raw, ulcerated lesions that have a crusty covering and bleed easily. They are a source of intense itching. Summer sores are caused by the larvae of stomach worms, carried to the wound site by flies that harbor the parasite. The flies are drawn to the moistness around the penis. Because summer sores usually indicate that your horse is infested with stomach worms, a dose of ivermectin is necessary. Your vet will also treat the localized summer sore. If it doesn't heal, it may have to be surgically removed.

Squamous cell carcinoma. This type of cancer can mimic summer sores, so a biopsy is usually required to tell the difference. Appaloosas, Paints, palominos and other geldings with pink or mottled skin are more prone to carcinoma of the penis and sheath. Like summer sores, you'll notice a crusty, oozing sore that refuses to heal.

Melanomas. Gray horses in particular are victims of melanoma. The sheath is a common site for a melanoma, which appears as a lump or nodule, often dangling from the outer skin of the sheath. Your vet may recommend removing melanomas on the sheath before they become invasive or so enlarged that they threaten the flow of urine.

Swelling, odor or itching. These symptoms potentially signal an infection, or a build-up of smegma that is irritating the sheath. Persistent swelling of the entire sheath, or edema, can be a warning of congestive heart failure, especially in older horses.

If you notice any of these signs, don't be shy. Call your vet.

Yes, Please Be Gentle With Him

The first time you clean your gelding's sheath, or if you're handling a young or green horse, enlist the help of your vet to perform the cleaning and explain the step-by-step process, or coach you through the job. Your vet will probably tranquilize your horse. Not only does this sedate or calm your horse, making it safer for everyone, but certain tranquilizers cause the penis to relax and extend, making sheath cleaning much easier.

Whether or not your vet is alongside for advice and assistance, make sure that you know your horse well before beginning. Is he easy to groom and fly spray, or is he ticklish under his belly? Does he let you lean against his flank, or does he get grumpy and pin his ears? If he's at all reluctant to let you handle him under his belly and around his flank, do not attempt

to clean his sheath without him being tranquilized. Even if restrained, your horse will still be able to "cow kick" you. Plus, a tense gelding will simply draw his penis even further up into his sheath, making the cleaning job nearly impossible.

Once you and your gelding have come to an agreement that this personal bathing ritual will be completed, lead him somewhere that's convenient for grooming activities, yet secure. Cross-ties, stocks or a wash rack are all possibilities.

Pour a small amount (about a tablespoon) of a very mild soap, such as Ivory, into a bucket of warm water and slosh it around to make light suds. There are also cleansers made especially for this purpose, such as Excalibur Sheath Cleaner. Never use an iodine or Betadine-based soap, or any medicinal shampoo. They are extremely irritating to the sheath and penis.

You probably want to don a pair of disposable rubber gloves before you get going. Otherwise, black smegma may get under your fingernails.

Next, soap up your hands. Then use your fingers to gently remove smegma that has accumulated in the folds of the sheath. Check the pouch at the end of the sheath, over the head of the penis, for a "bean," a hardened, round ball of smegma. As the penis extends, wash it in the same manner, gently rubbing off any loose or flaking skin. Then rinse the sheath and penis with plain water, being sure to remove any soapy residue. You can use a clean, soft sponge to help. If you notice that the sheath or penis is swollen or red, your vet may prescribe a topical antibiotic ointment to clear up a possible low-grade skin infection.

There! You did it! Welcome to the world of hands-on horse care. You can now nonchalantly relate a story certain to shock ol' Aunt Margaret at your next family reunion.