

SHEATH WASHING

There is a problem that geldings have that mares and stallions do not. Geldings need their sheath cleaned on a regular basis. And, since the penis is a part of the horse that is not easily seen up close, it is important, while cleaning, to examine the penis for any signs of disease.

What is normal?

In the normal state, the horse's penis remains within its protective sheath where it is held in place by muscles. When these muscles relax, the penis drops and becomes exposed. At the tip of the penis (the glans) is the opening of the urethra. This is surrounded by a deep pocket or fossa. Apart from the tip, which is covered by a thin sensitive membrane, the rest of the penis is covered by smooth, supple, well-oiled skin, much of which is normally folded within the prepuce. Oils and sweat from the skin glands and normally shed cells from the surface of the skin within the sheath accumulate in these folds and in the urethral fossa and sinus. This accumulation of waxy material is called smegma. It may be black, grey or cream colored in normal horses and has a greasy feel. It occasionally forms into bean-shaped lumps which lodge in the urethral fossa and sinus. Some horses produce very little smegma whereas others produce large quantities. In some horses, smegma can often be seen staining the opening of the sheath and on the inside of the thighs and hocks.



Washing a horse's penis and sheath

Sheath cleaning is usually required only once a year. Individual horses may require more or less frequent cleaning. Sometimes there are clues that it is time. If your horse makes a "oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh" sound when he trots, if there is a stale, musty odor, if there is swelling of the sheath, or if there are waxy stains on the inside of the back legs, then it is time to clean a sheath. While cleaning, the tip of the penis should be checked for any unusual appearance, as this is a common site for cancers, especially in horses with a lot of white.

How should sheath washing be performed?

Not many horses will allow sheath cleaning without tranquilization. Some horses will relax, or can be trained to relax, enough to allow cleaning. If you are able to perform the task yourself, use warm, clear water and a mild pure soap, such as Ivory bar soap, or (believe it or not) special sheath cleaning soaps, such as Excalibur. Wet and lather the penis thoroughly and wash with cloth or paper towels. Be sure to check the tip and remove the bean, if present. The bean will be in the urethral fossa, the pocket on the tip of the glans. It will be a soft, waxy lump wedged beside the urethra. Then rinse, rinse, rinse the whole area with clear water. It is very important to remove every bit of soap. There is no need to dry. Finally, a small amount of baby oil can be applied.

It is important not to use strong soap or to be too aggressive in cleaning. The penis and sheath have a permanent population of normal bacteria on their surface, just as all skin surfaces do. These bacteria do not cause disease; they undoubtedly help maintain the health of the skin and may help prevent infection by controlling unwelcome bacteria. Over cleaning will destroy the balance of bacteria and potentially allow dangerous bacteria to get established. You must also be gentle when handling the penis. Not only will the horse resent rough handling, but the nerves and muscles that retract the penis can be damaged and the horse will have a permanently dropped penis.