

Sheath cleaning

by Katelyn McNicol, BVSc(Hons)

WestVETS Animal Hospitals and Equine Reproduction Centre

Although most people rarely give their gelding's sheath and penis a second look, outlined below is what attention should be paid to this area and why. This article acts as a guide for geldings only, as a stallion's cleaning regime will vary depending on their breeding management.

Basic Anatomy

The penis is housed within the sheath and at the end of the penis is the glans. In the centre of the glans is the urethral opening surrounded by 3 recesses, the most prominent one being the sinus which is located above the urethra.



Recess above urethra with a small smegma bean

Other two recesses with small amount of smegma

Urethral Process

Why does my horse's penis get so dirty?

You may have noticed the thick smelly discharge that accumulates on the penis or in the sheath. This is what we call 'smegma', and it is a build up of dead skin cells, dirt, urine, and normal secretions from sebaceous and sweat glands.

The amount of smegma build up varies from horse to horse, with some horses seemingly maintaining a clean penis on their own, while others need more help.

The smegma coats the inside of the sheath and surface of the penis. It also accumulates around the urethral process and within the recesses. This is where horses develop 'smegma beans'.

Why do I need to clean his penis?

There are two main reasons for maintaining a pretty penis. The first relates to the amount of smegma that accumulates in the sheath and around the urethral opening. Large accumulations of smegma have been associated with infections of the penis. The smegma bean that develops in the urethral sinus can become very large (e.g. 5cm x 3cm) and could cause discomfort during urination. Smegma has also been suggested as a potential carcinogen.

The second reason to clean the penis is to identify any potential problems. This can include precancerous and cancerous lesions, parasitic infections, and bacterial infections.



Sheets of smegma on a penis and glans. Note the pink skin, even though this horse is a bay.

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The most common cancers that develop on the penis are squamous cell carcinomas (sun cancers) and melanomas. Breeds which have large amounts of pink skin, such as appaloosas, are at a higher risk of developing squamous cell carcinomas. However, don't be fooled, the majority of horses have an area of pink skin on their penis regardless of their overall body colour. Melanomas are a very common finding in grey horses.



Ask your veterinarian to clean and examine your gelding's penis at the time of his annual dental check. A yearly clean and exam is typically all that is needed. Your dental vet will be able to identify any potential problems. If you decide to take this task by yourself on an unsedated horse, care and some training may be required - not many horses appreciate the intrusion!

How often do I need to clean his penis?

Your horse's penis will typically need to be cleaned only once a year. This can very easily be done in combination with their annual dental, at which point your veterinarian can examine the penis and identify any potential problems. If you do decide to take on this task by yourself on an unsedated horse, be careful, not many horses appreciate this intrusion.

What to use?

This is a sensitive area for your horse, so the safest product to use is simply warm water. You should avoid using any product containing an anti-septic (e.g. soap) as this can disrupt the natural bacterial flora in the sheath and can allow overgrowth of pathogenic organism, resulting in infection.

Take home message:

Do give your gelding's sheath a second look, and if you notice a strong smell, flies, lumps or bumps, blood in their urine or difficulty urinating please contact your veterinarian.



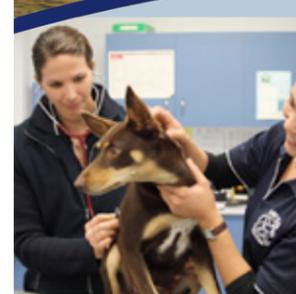


ABOUT THE AUTHOR: After graduating with honours in 2009 from the University of QLD, Katelyn McNicol joined the WestVets team as a mixed animal veterinarian. Although Katelyn loves all animals, her true passion is horses, being particularly interested in medicine and anaesthesia. Katelyn has also undertaken further study in equine dentistry and she is dedicated to the science of balancing a horse's teeth to enhance health, nutrition and performance.



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