

Male Horse Hygiene

Whilst some people find this subject an embarrassing one, it is an important one and one which all horse owners should be aware of and comfortable with. The sheath is a double fold of skin that covers the drawn up penis. Glands in the lining of the sheath produce a substance called sebum – when this secretion mixes with dirt and sloughed skin cells it forms a grey to black material called smegma.

Sometimes these secretions build up and accumulate into a soft wax-like deposit or form into dried hard flakes. A dirty sheath, with a build up of smegma can lead to infection and urinary problems. The sheath of a male horse therefore needs to be periodically cleaned. Some horses accept this procedure but others may require a vet to clean the sheath under standing sedation.

What to look for

Signs that your horse needs his sheath cleaned include -

- not letting his penis down to urinate
- a swollen sheath
- an odour
- flakes of deposits of smegma clinging to the penis or to the insides of his hindlegs.



Sometimes a painful sheath and penis will cause a horse to exhibit signs of colic or irritation. Any difficulty in urinating should be looked into immediately – swelling of the sheath and penis can be caused by other problems besides smegma accumulation and veterinary attention should be sought in order to treat the problem correctly.

Cleaning

The penis and sheath of male horses should be cleansed when required with warm water. Soaps and commercial sheath cleaners are generally discouraged as although they aid the removal of the smegma they may also kill the normal bacterial flora of the sheath and penis allowing the overgrowth of potentially pathogenic organisms. The sheath and penis should be thoroughly rinsed and dried afterwards.

Urethral 'Beans'

Besides affecting the sheath the dried smegma surrounded by mineral salts from the urine, can form a clay-like ball of debris at the end of the penis. It accumulates and becomes lodged in the urethral diverticulum, which is small pocket surrounding the urethra. (The tube-like structure which carries urine from the bladder). If left to develop “beans” can get as big as a walnut!



What to look out for

A urethral “bean” can cause infection or interfere with the passage of urine if it is allowed to become very large.

- A horse with a urethral bean might spray urine in a partially obstructed stream or just dribble urine.
- He may have several attempts to urinate – stopping and starting before being able to fully empty his bladder
- Colic signs or kicking up at sheath

Some small beans can be worked out of the diverticulum with your finger – but most horses resent this, so in the majority of cases sedation and removal of the bean by a vet is usually warranted. Large beans are usually painful to remove and under standing sedation your vet may need to crush the bean into pieces with a blunt instrument before removal can be achieved.

Some horses develop beans regularly. These horses can be helped greatly by scheduled sheath cleaning to prevent the build up that would otherwise become a bean.

Some geldings needs cleaning every few weeks: but most will be perfectly healthy with a sheath clean once or twice a year. The key is to know your horse – make sure you observe your horse when he urinates – he should let his penis down if there is a large build up of dried flakes and/or waxy material he probably needs to be cleaned.

Ask your vet to check your horses sheath and penis at a regular health check

To thoroughly examine the sheath and penis usually requires sedation to most horses, but regular examination will allow identification of other potentially serious problems which if identified early can be successfully treated.

Common sheath and penile conditions

Squamous Cell Carcinoma

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is the most common neoplasia (tumour) of the external genitalia of the male horse. It is locally invasive and capable of metastasis (secondary tumours forming at distant sites).

Different surgical approaches are required, depending on the extent of spread of a SCC. This can range from partial to full penile resection. In some cases euthanasia is sadly required.

Melanomas

Melanomas are most common in grey horses and typically arise from the skin around the anus. However the tumours are found on the sheath and prepuce. Laser surgery has become one of the most successful ways to treat melanomas but early veterinary intervention is advised



Sarcoids

Sarcoids are non-metastatic cutaneous tumours peculiar to horses. The external prepuce is sometimes affected. Laser surgery, cryotherapy or topical application of cytotoxic creams are some of the most successful ways to treat sarcoids but again early veterinary intervention is advised.