



Equine sheath and udder cleaning

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Stallions and geldings: sheath cleaning

While sheath cleaning is an important aspect of care for male horses, it may not be required as frequently for some animals as it is for others. For that reason, it's a good idea to have your veterinarian examine the sheath and penis of your horse during a routine wellness check to determine how frequently the process is needed.

Since your animal is usually sedated during the wellness check, that's also a good opportunity for your veterinarian to "check for beans." These beans are formed when dirt combines with shed cells from the penis and then builds up in little pockets at the end of the organ. If the horse is unable to expel these beans on his own, they can grow large enough to restrict the urethra — leaving the animal unable to pee.

While most horses have beans that don't cause problems, be sure to call your veterinarian if you notice that your horse is posturing to pee but then only dribbling or peeing small amounts of urine here and there. That behaviour can indicate an enlarged bean, an infection in the sheath or even a bladder stone.

When examining and removing any beans that may have formed, your clinician can also check the sheath and penis for any abnormalities. For example, the squamous cell tumour is a fairly common skin cancer that's found in the genital area. It's often treatable if caught in very early stages, but an aggressive tumour that's not caught early enough can result in the penis having to be amputated. Owners should also call their veterinarian if they notice any red spots or raised skin or small tumours on the penis — particularly the pink part.

Once the veterinarian has recommended a cleaning schedule, horse owners can usually do the actual sheath cleaning themselves. The sheath is basically the skin sac that covers the retracted penis. This sac builds up with smegma, a waxy substance that includes both dirt and shed skin cells. The smegma also contains a biofilm of bacteria that protects the skin and the genital area from infection.

While some horses don't have a large accumulation of smegma, others quickly build up a thick crust of material that can cause infection. Since overcleaning can prevent the smegma from acting as a natural barrier against infection, it's a good idea to consult with your veterinarian about the cleaning requirements of each individual animal.

Although many commercial products are available for sheath cleaning, lukewarm water is probably the best cleaning agent for softening the built-up crusts of dirt and then rinsing the sheath. Just use a towel to gently pat the area dry. The sheath doesn't have to be squeaky clean; just a gentle clean is all that's needed. An aggressive cleaning may harm the skin and make the area vulnerable to infections.

Because horses are sensitive in their genital area, owners should gradually introduce them to the idea of having the region touched. Usually there's a trust relationship that enables the owner to eventually train the animal to allow the actual cleaning.

The training process can begin with feeding the horse a favourite treat after riding — that's often a time when the penis hangs out, making the sheath more accessible. While grooming the animal, the owner can start by gliding one hand underneath the belly back to the sheath. Each time the horse allows his owner to touch that area, there's an opportunity to move the hand a little further into the sheath and eventually start peeling off the crust. If the horse becomes agitated, just stop and leave him alone until the next opportunity.

It's also a good idea to have another person there as a distraction. If someone can talk to the horse and stand by him as he eats feed, that will be enough to keep him quiet during the process.

Although most geldings and stallions become accustomed to the procedure and will eventually allow their owners to use just a wet cloth for the procedure, it's best to have a veterinarian remove any beans – a process that generally requires sedation.

Mares: udder cleaning and checking of vulva

Clients frequently ask us about whether the udder of a mare should be cleaned. In mares, the udder rarely represents a problem – but that doesn't mean udder cleaning is unnecessary. Often, mares will tolerate cleaning between their teats since it seems to make them more comfortable. Some mares accumulate quite a bit of debris between their teats, so cleaning helps to alleviate itching and other signs of discomfort. A more serious issue is when a mare accumulates moist, odorous debris around her teats and is uncomfortable when you clean the area. This situation usually requires some veterinary attention.

It's recommended to regularly check the vulva of a mare — especially when she is older and/or in heat. Some mares pool urine in their vagina, which can lead to urine leakage and urine scalding along the inside of her legs. Urine scalding can be very uncomfortable and hard to manage. If the skin between the mare's legs appears red, raw-looking and painful to touch, call your veterinarian. If the mare's discomfort persists for longer than two to three days (and beyond her regular heat cycle), or if the mare shows other unusual signs such as weakness in her tail tone or hind limbs, a veterinarian should also be consulted immediately.

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