

Duty calls

Cleaning and inspecting your horse's "private" areas may not be a task you relish, but it's important for his health and comfort.

by Kelli Taylor, DVM

You might think cleaning sheaths and udders is yet another responsibility (or chore) that comes with caring for a horse. You'll do the task dutifully, but wonder if it's really necessary for the health and well being of your horse.

Some argue that sheaths and udders are never cleaned in the wild and those horses seem to get along fine. Does that mean we don't really need to clean them at all? Yet we've all heard of the gelding that makes a "honking noise" during exercise, seen the "bean" that is removed by your veterinarian, or experienced the embarrassment of your gelding's crud-caked private part being displayed during a lesson or event.

How can we determine if we even need to clean sheaths and udders? How often should we do it, and with what technique? It all comes down to the individual mare, gelding or stallion.

What's normal?

All stallions and geldings produce normal secretions from sebaceous glands in the skin of the sheath and penis. This combines with naturally sloughed skin cells and creates the waxy substance known as "smegma", which can vary from a moist to a dry and crusty buildup. Some males produce a lot of smegma while others produce relatively little -- either can be normal for the individual. When smegma accumulates within the sheath, discomfort and irritation in the skin of the sheath and penis may occur. Additionally, if the buildup is moist it can attract insects, especially in the summer months, and is an excellent medium for bacterial growth.

Just around the urethral opening on the tip of the penis (or glans) is a pocket called the urethral diverticulum. When smegma accumulates within this pocket, the famous "bean" is developed. It's called a bean because the smegma is molded into a kidney bean-shaped lump as it builds up within the pocket. If the bean becomes large enough, it can cause irritation of the urethra and may even prevent urination altogether. It is important to check for a bean and evaluate the external genitalia for abnormalities at least twice a year, even if your gelding does not require regular cleanings.

Mares also have sebaceous glands within the skin of their udders. Normal secretions mixed with sweat and dirt cause the accumulation of brownish black material that is found between the teats. This buildup can make the mare extremely itchy. You may notice she actually enjoys a good cleaning.

All skin surfaces, including the udder, sheath and penis, also have a permanent population of normal bacteria that help maintain skin health by preventing the establishment of more harmful microbes. If you have a particularly dirty gelding, you may be tempted to clean him often, which can result in a disruption of normal bacterial flora. A shift in the ecological balance of bacteria along with dry skin (caused by over-washing, especially with harsh detergents) that chaps and cracks as the penis is retracted into the sheath, can lead to secondary bacterial infections. These

infections are often hard to control and require systemic antibiotics.

How often should I clean?

It is best to start with biannual cleanings. You can determine from there whether or not your horse needs it done more often or less. Some geldings and especially mares only require a good hosing off after a hard workout to keep these areas clean. But remember, even if your gelding does not require frequent cleanings, you or your veterinarian should still check for a “bean” and examine the area for any abnormalities at least twice a year.

Stallions require minimal cleaning if they are employed as breeding studs. The washing they normally receive prior to breeding is sufficient to keep them clean. If the stallion is used for live cover, you may only need to hose him off upon dismount to avoid heavy duty cleanings.

How should I do it?

In order to clean the sheath or udder, you will have to train your horse to grow accustomed to being touched in his or her “private area”. This may take some time and patience, using the approach and retreat technique.

Never introduce your hand into the sheath without warning! Safety is key as many horses that have not had their sheaths/udders cleaned before will likely object with a swift kick from a hind leg. It is best to have someone hold the horse for you. That way, the handler can move the horse’s rear end away from you if he goes to kick, placing you safely out of the injury zone. This only works if you and the handler are on the same side of the horse!

Standing near your horse’s elbow, reach along his belly to the sheath (or udder), and get him used to having your hand in this area. Remember to always be patient and gentle. If you handle your gelding roughly, he will never relax and drop, and that makes your job much harder.

If you are uncomfortable working on this part of your horse, do not hesitate to call your veterinarian. He will be able to lightly sedate your horse and clean the sheath (or udder) quickly without anyone getting hurt.

- Once your gloved hand (see sidebar for the equipment you’ll need) has been introduced into the sheath, lightly grasp the penis and with gentle traction draw it out. You can also try lightly rubbing on the inside of the sheath to encourage him to drop. While you have hold of the penis, you should clean and inspect it for abnormalities. Take a wet piece of cotton and have the handler put some Ivory on it, then soap up the shaft of the penis to remove the encrusted smegma. Alternate soapy cotton pieces with a plain water rinse until clean. If you notice any unusual lumps, bumps or sores, a call to your veterinarian is warranted.
- Next, check for a “bean”. Locate the opening of the urethra, run a finger into the urethral diverticulum that surrounds it, and feel for a hard lump. If one is present, use your index finger to gently scoop it out of the pocket. Sometimes the bean is large enough that it will need to be broken down in order to remove it from the fossa. This can usually be accomplished by squeezing the bean into multiple smaller pieces. If you are unsure or unable to remove the bean, call your veterinarian. If the bean is left in, it will continue to

accumulate more smegma and can become large enough (the size of a chicken egg) to occlude the urethral opening.

- After the bean is removed, the sheath will also need to be cleaned. Take another piece of cotton with soap on it and reach up into the sheath. You may feel the inside of the sheath has a bumpy surface; these are clumps of smegma that all need to be removed. Again, alternate soap with rinsing until all the smegma is removed and the sheath is clean between all of the folds you can reach.
- Now that everything is nice and clean, it's time for a final rinse. It is important to remove all traces of cleanser so there is nothing left behind to irritate your horse's delicate skin. This can be accomplished with a few cotton pieces soaked in water or by using a garden hose.

Before becoming over-zealous with cleaning those special parts, consider your horse's individual needs. You may find you only need to venture there once or twice a year to keep your horse happy and healthy. Avoid over-cleaning. A good rinse after a hard workout may be all he needs!

[sidebar]

What equipment do I need?

You will need the same set of items for either a sheath or udder cleaning.

- Wash rack or other spot that is free of distractions for the horse
- Two pairs of thin disposable gloves (smegma has a distinctive odor that can linger on your hands)
- Bucket of warm water
- Gentle cleanser such as Ivory dishwashing liquid or Excalibur sheath cleaner; disinfectants such as Nolvasan or Betadine should be avoided because they can irritate and dry out the skin and kill off the healthy bacteria, leaving the area susceptible to infection
- Cotton roll ripped into several pieces or strong heavy duty (yet soft) paper towels; you could also use a sponge, but it will need to be traded out often as bacteria will accumulate in it -- and be sure to label it so it does not get used for any other area!
- Optional: a garden hose is convenient if your horse will tolerate it in that area

[callout]

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