

Cleaning Your Gelding's Sheath

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"Check to make sure there are no prospective boyfriends, elderly neighbors, or Brownie troops with a line of sight to the proceedings. Though of course they're probably going to show up unexpectedly ANYWAY once you're in the middle of things. Prepare a good explanation." © P Harris 1998

The subject of cleaning geldings' sheaths brings up some strong feelings about what is the right thing to do. One school of thought holds that you should never clean a sheath, as you destroy 'friendly' bacteria in the process. However, look around at any horse gathering and you will see that self-cleaning doesn't always happen, not if the presence of yellowing flakes or, worse, lumps of dark gunk are anything to go by. The smell alone can be enough to convince you that whatever bacteria are present, they're certainly not friendly.

Why does this happen? One answer is that a gelded horse is no longer in its natural condition. Stallions rarely exhibit the same kind of problem, as the act of covering a mare effectively keeps everything clean. Yet it is not only this, as some geldings seem to be more successful in the self-cleansing department than others.

If left in a crusty condition, geldings may get a swollen, infected sheath and need antibiotics to clear the problem up. Many will develop a 'bean'. This is a pale, kidney-shaped accumulation of smegma in a small pouch (the urethral fossa) just inside the urethra. Even regularly cleaned horses may have a bean hidden, so it is always worth checking. If not removed, these can develop to a large size and become painful.

Jock Ruddock, founder of the Equine Touch, maintains that some cases of unidentifiable rear lameness can be attributed to a large bean. He even went so far as to remove a 'cock rock' (his term) when demonstrating on a horse in front of audiences at Equitana. He removed another at the Windsor Royal Mews, although not in royal presence. So relax – if your horse has a bean, you're in the company of some very top drawer owners.

So, how do you go about cleaning your gelding's sheath and what should you use? We can start by ruling out the hosepipe, as that approach is insensitive and unfair. The next thing to remember is that picking dried gunk off delicate skin can be annoying and painful. So, warm water and a cleaning product are essential if you want your horse to remain amenable whenever you approach his nether regions.

There are a range of products you can use that will not destroy all the bacteria present or irritate sensitive skin. Check at the saddlery for commercial sheath cleansers. Some vets suggest using a gentle lubricant, which will help to soften and lift the dirt. The most famous brand of lubricant, normally associated with human activities, comes highly recommended.

Aqueous cream, available from most chemists, contains paraffin oil and can be rubbed in. Once it has softened the dirt, it can be rinsed out with (warm) water. Other suggestions are mild facial soaps, betadine soap (an antibacterial skin cleanser), olive oil or aloe vera gel. Always rinse out any residue, so that you don't cause irritation or over-dryness.

It's a good idea to wear latex gloves and use a sponge. This will prevent you from prodding fingers into an area where most males would definitely prefer not to be poked. If not wearing gloves, be careful of your fingernail length. But be warned, this smell clings to the skin, so wearing gloves could save you from a lot of odd looks in the supermarket queue.

Try to transmit confidence as you work, but always be gentle and unhurried. The best time to do this job is after exercise, when the horse is pleasantly tired and relaxed. Never do it while your horse is waiting to go out or be fed, or while distracting events are happening nearby. A bit of grooming may help your gelding to relax and drop his parts. Sometimes, gently massaging the outside of the sheath can encourage him to let it all hang out, but check which neighbours are watching first.

However, if your horse is reluctant to let you touch his equipment, you may need to adapt your approach. Fortunately, you can clean effectively even if the object of interest is withdrawn. Simply reach inside with your sponge and you can reach the worst of the dirt. After a few sessions, your horse will become less concerned by the process.

If your gelding is likely to kick, stand well forward of his back legs, close to his body. If your boy is determined not to let you handle his tackle, don't get into a fight or resort to tricks. This will only make him more distrustful next time. If you really can't get near, ask the vet or dentist to do the job for you, while the horse is sedated.

Should you notice signs of swelling or abnormal amounts of discharge, or if your horse never fully lowers his parts, always check with your vet, as something may be badly wrong. An unpleasant discharge that can only be described as being like 'cream cheese' may even indicate the presence of tumours higher up, so do not delay.

As with all aspects of horse care, prevention is better than cure, so if you get into the habit of regularly cleaning your gelding's sheath, there is less likelihood of problems arising. He is going to look a whole lot better when in company too!