

Sheath Cleaning

Cleaning a Horse's Sheath

Five things you should know about sheath cleaning for your horse's health and comfort.

By Barb Crabbe **Fiction:** It's a nasty job, but if I clean my horse's sheath frequently, it won't be as bad.

Fact: Your horse's sheath has a population of "friendly" microorganisms that help maintain a healthy balance within. If you clean it too frequently, you'll kill these microorganisms, disrupting this balance -- and your horse's sheath is likely to get even dirtier. It's best to clean his sheath every 6 to 12 months.

Fiction: To really clean my horse's sheath, I should use an antibacterial soap, such as Betadine or chlorhexidine.

Fact: To protect those friendly microorganisms, never use antibacterial soap. Use a commercial sheath cleaner (such as Excalibur or Equi-Pro, both available through American Livestock Supply, Inc., 800/356-0700). These products cut through the grease, have a pleasant odor, and make sheath cleaning easier. Warm water also helps cut grease -- and your horse will like it better.

Fiction: My horse swishes his tail and sometimes raises a hind leg when I clean his sheath, but he'd never kick me.

Fact: Don't be so sure! Some horses really resent this procedure. They'll not only kick -- but they'll do so fast and hard. To be safe, stand well forward, by your horse's shoulder, and reach back to his sheath. If he continues to threaten you, he may need to be sedated by your veterinarian. (Tip: To save time and money, ask your vet to clean your horse's sheath during another routine procedure that involves sedation, such as dentistry.)

Fiction: I can't clean my horse's sheath unless he drops his penis -- which he won't do unless he's sedated.

Fact: You can do a very thorough job even when your horse hasn't dropped -- simply by reaching up inside. In this case, you'll need to go in up to your elbow, so wear a long disposable glove to avoid getting the greasy, smelly smegma on your arm and sleeve. Ask your vet for an obstetrical glove -- it's perfect for the job. You'll also need a bucket of warm water and about 20 heavy-duty paper towels. To clean your horse's sheath, put a generous dollop of sheath cleaner (about 2 to 3 tablespoons) in your hand, along with a wet towel. Reach up into your horse's sheath, and gently work the accumulated grime loose. When the towel gets soiled, grab a new one, and keep working until the towel comes back clean. Clean all the way from his sheath's opening up to the base of his penis. Depending on how dirty the sheath is, you may need to use additional cleaner as you go.

Fiction: Once I've gotten rid of the grime, the job is done.

Fact: Not yet. Once you've removed the smegma, check for and remove the bean—a ball of whitish goo that forms within a small pocket at the tip of your horse's penis. If not removed, a bean can get as large as a walnut and obstruct urine flow, which can cause your horse discomfort and potential harm. If you don't know how to remove the bean, ask your vet to show you.

Finally, rinse thoroughly with clean water and clean towels. Or, if your horse will tolerate it, run the hose up inside his sheath. You'll know you've done a thorough job when the paper towel in your hand comes out as clean as it went in, and the rinse water runs clear.

Barb Crabbe is an equine practitioner based in Portland, Oregon.

This article first appeared in the July 2000 issue of *Horse & Rider* magazine.

Part 1: About Sheath Cleaning...

WRITTEN BY: [Cheryl Sutor](#) [1998]

First, we need to discuss a few things that are necessary prior to cleaning your horse's sheath. We all know that it isn't the most pleasant experience, but it is essential to your horse's health! Therefore, it must be done regularly.

What is "smegma"? Smegma is a collection of dirt and excretions, builds up inside the sheath and must be removed for the sake of the horse's health. It is not the most pleasant thing to do, but it is essential. If you don't or can't do this, you should have your veterinarian clean your horse's sheath at least every 6 months.

What is a "bean"? A firm lump of smegma that has collected and hardened inside the horse's penis. This lump or "bean" must be removed as often as possible. It can cause serious pain to your horse. There have been thousands of cases in the last year where the bean is overlooked by the owner and becomes so large that the horse can no longer urinate...which may also cause other problems due to blockage.

What cleaning products should you use?

1.) Soap: K-Y jelly, Excalibur soap, betadine soap, or other mild soap such as Ivory. The choice of soap is entirely yours. However, if your horse is afraid of the hose/baths, you can leave off the rinsing step only if you use K-Y jelly and no other type of soap. The K-Y jelly will allow you to slide off most of the debris and smegma from inside your horse's sheath without the use of water. If you use betadine soap or other mild soap, be sure to rinse the entire area completely. If a soapy residue is left behind, it can irritate and dry out the area.

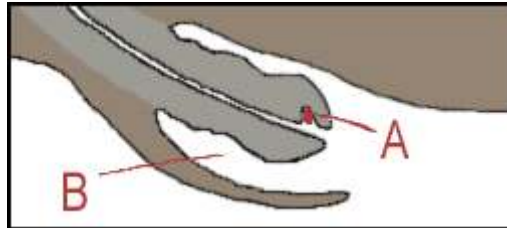
2.) Latex Gloves: You will also need a pair of latex gloves (lubricated extremely well) if you want your hands to stay fairly clean. If not, you will have to lubricate your hands and wash them well when you are done. You may have to stop while cleaning to add more lubrication to your hands or gloves.

How do you get your horse's penis to extract?

1.) You can reach into the sheath, grasp the penis lightly and gently ease it out, or rub along the sheath in the area between the sheath and penis to get it to drop. (This area is shown as "B" in the diagram below).

2.) You can tranquilize the horse. Once tranquilized, the penis usually becomes relaxed enough to extract on its own. However, this method is not recommended unless supervised by a veterinarian.

One of the most important things to remember when cleaning your horse's sheath, is to be patient and gentle. Don't be in a rush. Never be rough with your horse's genitals, or you may end up injured. If he hasn't been taught to accept humans handling his genital area, it is very important that you teach him. He will have to periodically have his genitals cleaned throughout his entire life.



A: Where you will find the 'bean'.

B: Inside the sheath area.

Part 2: THE CLEANING PROCESS...

WRITTEN BY: [Patricia Harris](#) [1998]

- 1.) 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.
- 2.) Trim your fingernails short. Assemble horse, hose, and your sense of humor (plus, ideally, Excalibur cleanser and perhaps thin rubber gloves).
- 3.) Use hose (or damp sponge) to get the sheath and its inhabitant wet. Uh, that is, do this in a *civilized* fashion with due warning to the horse; he is apt to take offense if an icy-cold hose blasts unexpectedly into his personal regions ;-)
- 4.) Now introduce your horse to Mr Hand . What I find safest is to stand facing the horse's head, with my shoulder and hip snugly against the horse's thigh and hip so that if he makes any suspicious move such as raising his leg, I can feel it right away and am in any case pressed so close that all he can do is shove, not really kick. The horse should be held by an assistant or by your free hand, NOT tied fast to a post or to crossties. He may shift around a good bit if he's not happy with Mr Hand's antics, but don't be put off by that; as long as you are patient and gradual, and stick close to his side, he'll get over it. Remember that it would be most unladylike of you to simply make a direct grab for your horse's Part. Give the horse a clue about what's on the program. Rest your hand against his belly, and then slide it back til you are entering The Home of the Actual Private Part. When you reach this first region of your destination, lube him up good with Excalibur or whatever you're using. If the outer part of his sheath is really grungy you will feel little clods and nubbies of smegma peeling off as you grope around in there. Patiently and gently expedite their removal.
- 5.) Thus far, you have probably only been in the outer part of the sheath. The Part Itself, you'll have noticed, is strangely absent. That's because it has retired shyly to its inner chambers. Roll

up them thar sleeves and follow in after it ;-)

6.) As you and Mr Hand wend your way deeper into the sheath, you will encounter what feels like a small portal that opens up into a chamber beyond. Being attentive to your horse's reaction, invite yourself in . You are now in the inner sanctum of The Actual Private Part. It's hiding in there towards the back, trying to pretend it isn't there. Say hi and wave to it . No, really, work your finger back and forth around the sides of it. If the horse won't drop, this is your only shot at removing whatever dried smegma is clinging to the surface of the Part itself. So, gently explore around it, pulling out whatever crusty topsoil you find there. Use more water and more Excalibur if necessary to loosen attached gunk.

7.) When Mr Hand and the Actual Private Part have gotten to know each other pretty well, and the Part feels squeaky clean all around, there remains only one task: checking for, and removing, the bean. The bean is a pale, kidney-shaped accumulation of smegma in a small pouch just inside the urethra. Not all horses accumulate a bean, but IME the majority do, even if they have no visible external smegma. So: the equine urethra is fairly large diameter, and indeed will permit you to very gently insinuate one of your slimmer fingers inside the urethral opening. Do so, and explore upwards for what will feel like a lump or "pea" buried no more than, I dunno, perhaps 3/4" in from the opening. If you do encounter a bean, gently and sympathetically persuade it out with your finger. This may require a little patience from BOTH Mr Hand AND the horse, but the horse will be happier and healthier once it's accomplished. In the rare event that the bean is too enormous for your finger to coax out, you might try what I did (in desperation) last month on the orange horse: Wrap thumb and index finger around the end of the Part and squeeze firmly to extrude the bean. Much to my surprise it worked and orange horse did NOT kill me for doing it and he does not seem to have suffered any permanent damage as a result ;-> I have never in my life seen another bean that enormous, though.

8.) Now all that's left to do is make a graceful exit and rinse the area very thoroughly in apology for the liberties you've taken . A hose will be MUCH easier to use here than just a sponge and bucket, IME. Make sure to direct the water into the Part's inner retreat too, not merely the outer part of the sheath. This may require you to enfold the end of the hose in your hand and guide it up there personally.

9.) Ta-da, you are done! Say, "Good horsie" and feed him lots of carrots. Watch him make funny faces at the way your hands smell. Hmm. Well, perhaps there is ONE more step...

10.) The only thing I know of that is at all effective in removing the lovely fragrance of smegma from your hands (fingernails arms elbows and wherever else it's gotten) is Excalibur. Even then, if you didn't use gloves you may find you've got an unusual personal perfume for a while. So, word to the wise, do NOT clean your horse's sheath just before an important job interview or first date ;-) and of course, there is that one FINAL step...

11.) Figure out how to explain all this to your mother (or the kid from next door, or the meter reader, or whoever else you've just realized has been standing in the barn doorway speechlessly watching the entire process.)

Now, go thou forth and clean that Part :-)

The original question was: What causes a "bean"?

Just had my gelding's sheath cleaned and he did have a bean, which he strongly objected to having removed! What causes that bean? His sheath was very clean - dirty penis but clean sheath.

The Response:

Ok, here's the scoop. Male horses secrete a lubricant from their sheaths called smegma. Some horses produce a lot of it while others seem to have very little - it's all on an individual basis. This is the "stuff" you clean off of his penis, though it's usually dried on it. Smegma is very thick, kind of like half-dried handcream (and smells NASTY). It can collect and get trapped in the groove around the urethra. Thus creating a "bean" because the shape of the groove also shapes the smegma.

"Beans" can be a life threatening problem. If allowed to get too large, they can shut off the urethra. They can also cause infections making the sheath swell and again, cut off the flow of urine. It is important to check them every so often, but you don't want to clean a sheath too often. Cleaning too often can cause irritation and similar problems to not cleaning enough. Also, in the case of a breeding stallion, you must be extremely careful what you use to clean them with. Use only a mild soap such as Ivory (handsoap, not the detergent) as others can act as spermicides. One really good trick is to use mineral oil (baby oil). It softens up all the smegma and makes cleaning really easy. (I think Excalibur is made mostly of this). Remember the smegma is there for a reason - for lubrication. That's why I like the baby oil - it helps to keep their penis' from getting irritated.

As far as the wild horses or mustangs - when bred they do get cleaned. However the average mustang stallion is in a bachelor herd until he's around 7. It is unusual for them to have a harem at any earlier age (there was a huge study done on this in Nevada). Thus, they aren't "cleaned" for the first time, until a very mature age. Later, when a younger stallion takes over his harem, the old stallion once again returns to a bachelor herd. Any "cleaning" is very rare while one is in the bachelor herds.

Certainly a bean can create pain - thus one should check their horse often. However, one must keep in mind that smegma is a lubricant and was put there for a reason. Just as overwashing can cause dry skin, so can overwashing the sheath. It will dry, crack and get split skin - talk about painful. Not to mention the potential for infections. In her book "How To Be Your Own Veterinarian (Sometimes)", Ruth B. James mentions that a gelding usually requires cleaning only once a year. There are also some very helpful hints on how to do this beginning on page 294. Many of my other breeding references say the same thing, but since Ms. James book is much easier to find in bookstores, I refer everyone to read it.

On "Cleaning the sheath"

The penis is...what you are referring to as his hangy-downy thing! The sheath is the loose skin in which his "hangy-downy" thing goes into when it isn't hangy-downing. The bean (if there is one) is in the urethra, and I would not go searching for one if I were you! Let the vet handle this - removal of the bean if it exists, can be irritating and even painful to your gelding. We have a very easy going gelding, and he had to be tranquilized, twitched, and he still kicked out.

As far as cleaning, don't overdo it (Dr. Ruth's book will tell you this). Again, for first time cleaning, I would let the vet do it. And if he is difficult to clean, I would pay the vet to do it every time!

On the horse. Like I said before, some produce more smegma than others. I watch my stallions to see when they're getting dirty. (They are trained to allow me to check them). If you're breeding a stallion, you have to clean him of course before breeding, but many times just plain water will do.

If you're in doubt about how often your particular horse needs to be cleaned, have your vet check him when he comes out. The vet can best advise you on the frequency needed for cleaning your horse after seeing him.

Some Additional Tips

Hi just wanted to share this with you. The first time Racer had his sheath cleaned he was twitched. He tried to kick the vet big time while twitched. I was not a happy camper and decided I would get this young gelding used to being handled. So this is how I started. EVERY time I groomed him- which was daily. I would tentatively touch his sheath. His leg would lift up, I would withdraw my hand, gradually, the touch to his sheath became firmer, but still gentle. After about 2 months, he would stand quietly while I massaged his sheath. DO NOT do this in view of nosey neighbors! LOL What they must of thought of me! I then started taking the softest curry I had and very gently (almost tickling him) I would run the brush down the inside of his back leg. By golly, he would drop his penis. We kept this up for hmmm, maybe 3 weeks. Now all I have to do is get the mineral oil and apply it inside the sheath. He stands quietly and does not fight me at all. It is kind of icky when you are up to your wrist inside his sheath. You do of course wear gloves. Then I tickle his leg with the curry, he drops, and I put mineral oil on his penis, and then just forget about it for 3 days. Then with warm water and sponge, I clean him. The smegma just falls off, there is no pulling of the skin and we both are happy. But looking for his bean- I think I will wait and let the vet do that search! I hope I have helped you a little.

Actually... Besides the training that MA suggested, I always like to have the vet out whenever dealing with a new horse, to give them a little tranquilizer for the first time they are cleaned. It can make the whole experience alot easier for them and you. When tranqed, the boys naturally let go and their penis' will drop on their own (I only give them enough to relax them, but they're still real conscious of what's going on). Truthfully, I think it would be a real good idea for you to have your vet come out to show you how to do this the first time. Even though we are going to post some photos, there is nothing like first hand experience. Really, a vet can explain to you what to look for and any abnormalities. Some horses can have penile warts or all sorts of other things, and it would be best to have a real experienced eye check your gelding out first.

Also, mares produce it around their udders. When it dries it sticks to her and can hurt when you try to pull it off. The best way to clean her bag is to soften the smegma first by using some baby oil or a rag with warm water.

This article was taken from contributions made by Tonda, MA, And Rhonda
THANKS!



(above) The terminal part of the urethra is seen protruding from the end of the penis surrounded by the fossa in which there is a sinus containing smegma:
(below) the sinus has been exposed by drawing the urethra to one side



(EDITOR'S NOTE:

This article is meant to be used for information and education and as with any equine problems, it is always advised to contact your veterinarian for diagnosis and help with your horse)