



SHEATH WASHING

Some horse owners feel that it is necessary to wash a colt or gelding's prepuce (sheath) and/or penis on a fairly regular basis. While this may seem an innocent attempt to keep their horse 'clean', excessive sheath washing is usually unnecessary and can result in the establishment of quite severe bacterial infection which can be very difficult to resolve.

What is normal?

In the relaxed state, the horse's penis normally remains within its protective sheath where it is held in place by muscles. At the tip of the penis (the glans) is the opening of the urethra. This is surrounded by a deep pocket or fossa. Apart from the glans which is covered by a thin sensitive membrane, the rest of the penis is covered by smooth, supple, well-oiled skin, much of which is normally folded within the prepuce.

Debris from the normal secretions of the skin glands and normally-dying cells from the surface of the skin within the sheath may accumulate in these folds and in the urethral fossa and diverticulum. This accumulation of waxy material is called 'smegma'. It may be black, grey or cream coloured in normal horses and has a slightly greasy feel. It occasionally forms into bean-shaped lumps which lodge in the urethral fossa.

Some horses produce very little smegma whereas others produce large quantities. In such horses, smegma can often be seen staining the opening of the sheath and on the inside of the thighs and hocks.

The penis and sheath have a permanent population of normal bacteria on their surface, just as all skin surfaces do. These bacteria do not cause disease, they undoubtedly help maintain the health of the skin and may help prevent infection by controlling 'unwelcome' bacteria (specifically *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Taylorella equigenitalis*).

What harm can sheath washing do?

Although sheath washing sounds a good idea and has been recommended universally over the years, it can have a detrimental effect if the normal ecological balance of skin bacteria is disturbed.

Washing the penis and sheath with strong detergent solutions can remove the natural skin oils, resulting in dry penile skin which cracks as it folds and unfolds, causing irritation and damage followed by inflammation and secondary infection. If this infection is caused by bacteria that are easy to treat, the problem may resolve spontaneously once washing with detergent has stopped. However local or systemic antibiotic treatment may be necessary.



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Repeated washing with antiseptic, i.e. antibacterial washes or detergent solutions can result in alteration or removal of the normal penile skin bacterial population. This may result in colonisation by unwelcome bacteria that are not normally present, causing penile skin and sheath infections. The infection results in inflammation, swelling of local tissues and a profuse foul-smelling discharge.

How should sheath washing be performed?

If your horse appears to have a healthy clean sheath then there is almost certainly no need to wash it at all. In horses that produce large amounts of smegma and appear uncomfortable, excess smegma can be wiped or rinsed away with warm clean water using soap that contains no antiseptics or detergents.

A small amount of light mineral oil (such as baby oil) may help to loosen lumps and make excessive smegma easier to remove. It is important to be gentle and not abrade the skin and rinse all trace of soap away.