

Checking for Beans: Hygiene for the Male Horse

By Ivana Ruddock

Photo 1. A large bean like this can surely cause great discomfort for the horse.



As we travel the world teaching our bodywork, we continue to find that examining and cleaning of geldings' and stallions' sheaths is not as routine as it should be. In some countries, the horse caregivers - and veterinarians - have not heard of the importance of this „hygiene“. Yet it is simple enough to do yourself.

What is a Bean?

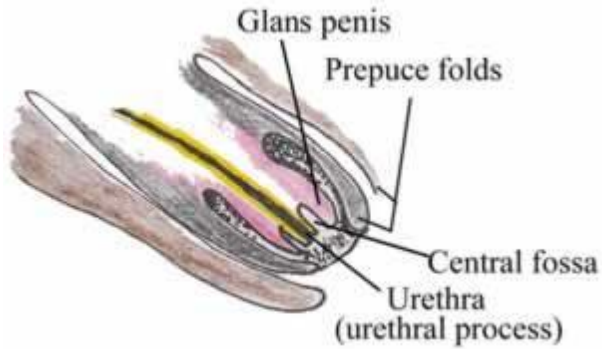
A lubricating substance called „smegma“ is naturally secreted from the penis membranes. This substance is thick, often dark, smelly, waxy, and slippery, and if in excess will collect in the pocket around the urethra. There it can cause discomfort for the horse and can even disturb the flow of urine, so the sheath and penis require periodic cleaning, at least once a year. Presence of the hard „bean“ (see **Photos 1-4**), as this built-up mass is often called, can also cause unspecific hind leg lameness (due to discomfort - see NHM Volume 10 Issue 2, "Perplexing Stride Problem") or even colic (due to obstruction of the urethra and making urination difficult).

Cleaning of the sheath, or the prepuce as it is sometimes called, is a simple procedure if the horse allows you to handle his penis. Safety is a very important factor - some horses could react defensively, so cleaning may need to be performed during sedation. If your veterinarian sedates your horse for some other reason, such as scheduled dentistry, it may be a good opportunity to clean the sheath and penis.



If not, the Equine Touch could be a very useful precursor to a cleaning, as many geldings „drop down“ and relax during the Basic Body Balance. This is a great time to check the sheath and penis for smegma and beans, or simply to get familiar with his anatomy. It's always helpful to know what you are looking for and where exactly to check for beans.

Male Anatomy

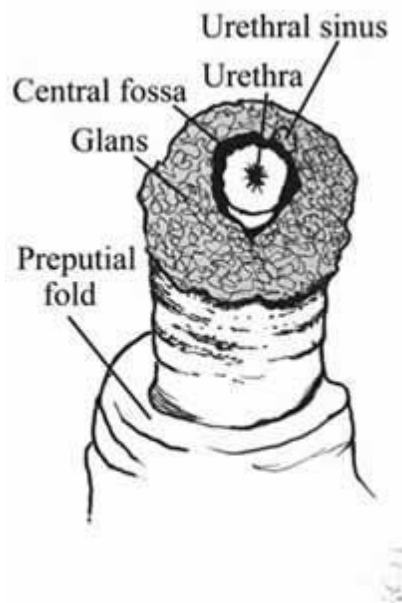


The equine sheath is peculiar, having additional folds (see **Diagram 1**) that allow for considerable lengthening of the penis during erection.

Diagram 1: Lengthwise cross section of a sheath and penis

The hairless skin of the sheath contains many oil (sebaceous) and sweat glands. Their secretions, together with dead cells, secretions from other glands, and urine, form the beans. Bean size can reach the size of a big chestnut, or larger, due to the elasticity of the penis tissue. Sometimes it is a cheesy consistency, or it can be hard as a stone (which is what it is called in some countries). The bean is usually located around the urethral orifice (central fossa) which is the opening on the free end of the penis (glans penis). Smaller beans can also be found inside the urethral sinus, which is a smaller space within the central fossa. (See **Diagram 2**.)

Diagram 2: Parts of a sheath and penis



Cleaning the Sheath

For the cleaning you will need gloves (cotton, which helps to softly scrub, or latex, to keep hands from picking up the sheath's odor); a large syringe; warm water (not hot); and a mild cleanser (do not use any antibacterial soap - it will kill the healthy bacteria that keeps the local environment in balance).

Stand beside the horse's flank with a good handler at his head. Run your hand carefully over his belly towards the sheath. Use care if you observe any signs of „threatening“ to kick you (lifting the leg, swishing the tail) or moving away from you. Most horses enjoy a belly scratching or rubbing, which often encourages them to drop the penis.

I like to start the cleaning by looking for beans when the horse drops down. Removing them first allows for a more comfortable cleaning. To check for beans, you will need to hold the shaft of the penis just underneath the glans. Be careful - some horses really do not like this! A couple of geldings, both with visible swelling and discomfort in the sheath area, did not allow me to touch the area at all. The veterinarian used mild sedation and cleaned the sheath and penis, and in both cases there were HUGE beans, which had started local inflammation.

If the horse is fine and you can hold the glans penis, try to gently „open“ the area at the tip of the penis. The smegma beans usually just fall out, but sometimes you have to run your thumbs gently around the urethra, scooping any of the smegma material out of the pocket. This could be very unpleasant for some horses, so be careful and observe for any signs of discomfort. Inside the deep pocket is the small, second opening (into the urethral sinus) where some additional beans may be found, if the horse allows it.

After checking for beans, if the horse is comfortable you can start to clean the shaft of the penis. If he pulls the penis deep inside his sheath, put diluted cleanser on your gloved hand and reach up into his sheath to clean it. You can also use the big syringe to squirt enough warm solution into the area. Massage gently inside the sheath, and around the shaft of the penis, to release any build-up of dirt.

Rinse the sheath with clean warm water to wash away any residual cleaner or dirt. This cleaning should be done about every 6 months, no less than once a year.

About the author:

MVDr. Ivana Ruddock is a veterinarian from the Czech Republic and a member of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association. An avid researcher and former lecturer in anatomy and physiology, she is also the Director in charge of Education for the Equine Touch Foundation, which she and her husband Jock Ruddock developed. The Equine Touch, described as the 'ultimate hands on modality for horses', is the first equine bodywork discipline in the United Kingdom to be awarded national accreditation status.