

One for the boys



A regular check of a stallion's or gelding's genitals is important to ensure the good health and hygiene of this delicate area.

Lesley Barwise-Munro MRCVS explains what to look for and why

A melanoma of the sheath and penis in a 14-year-old gelding — who was still actively hunting

EXAMINATION of the sheath, penis and testicles can be likened to a "well man check" for horses. Just like dental checks, foot care, vaccinations and worm control, it's an essential part of routine healthcare.

But many horses are not co-operative enough to allow a thorough and safe check inside the sheath (sometimes called the prepuce) without sedation, so vet assistance is advisable to allow early disease detection and treatment.

Unless an owner has specific concerns, a once-a-year check should be sufficient for horses less than 15 years old — or every six months for the older horse.

Infections of the sheath

SMEGMA is an accumulation of secretions, dead cells and debris inside the sheath.

Although older geldings will produce more smegma, most male horses do not need regular sheath and penis cleaning. Overzealous cleaning can cause detrimental changes to the protective microflora of bacteria that live in the sheath, increasing

susceptibility to infections that can be hard to treat.

Some horses develop excess foul-smelling smegma that causes a dark-coloured discharge, sometimes seen on the inside of the horse's thighs due to the sheath catching the legs when he lies down. This warrants initial veterinary examination to identify any underlying or associated conditions, and a programme to control the problem, often involving regular sheath cleaning.

For routine cleaning, use warm water only or a proprietary

non-bactericidal, soap-based sheath cleaner.

An accumulation of smegma, referred to as a bean, can occur inside the end of the horse's penis. If it reaches a size sufficient to cause discomfort, it should be removed by a vet.

Horses that tend to urinate from the sheath without protruding the penis can develop urine scalding, making them more susceptible to sheath infections and possible predisposition to malignant (cancerous) changes. More

frequent health checks should be carried out.

Tumours and swelling

THE sheath can be the site of tumours — melanomas are the most common.

Melanomas usually occur in grey horses over six years of age. Check for sheath melanoma at least every three months. Take prompt action if redness is seen. Surgical removal or laser is advised at an early stage.

Other sites where you should check for melanomas, alerting you

TESTICLE TROUBLE

A sudden onset of pain or swelling of one or both of a stallion's testicles could point to a 180-360° torsion of the testicle around its cord, causing signs ranging from acute colic to lameness.

Orchitis can create a hot, swollen and painful testicle and may be caused by infection or trauma. Both causes can trigger a rise in temperature locally around the testicle, reducing fertility for about two months after the situation is rectified.

A specific "well horse check" is recommended when foals reach the appropriate age for castration. Although testicular size does not affect the timing of the operation, veterinary examination may reveal that only one testicle is present in the scrotum. Abdominal testicles can now be removed under sedation by laparoscopy or keyhole surgery. A single testicle should not be left.

Orchitis, or swollen testicle. This can be caused by infection or trauma.

