



Assuring the Health and Well-Being of Your Pregnant Mare

Provided by American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP)

As a conscientious owner, you probably have many questions about caring for your expectant mare. In truth, you may be a little worried. Relax. With a little TLC, your mare should progress through her pregnancy without mishap. Proper nutrition, deworming, exercise, and vaccinations will help ensure a healthy pregnancy, and you can look forward to the birth of your foal with greater confidence.

Assisting Mother Nature

Good broodmare management is the best aid for assisting the mare through the critical first 30-60 days of pregnancy. The mare should go into the breeding season fit and perhaps gaining weight. Severely underweight mares will have more trouble conceiving than will mares of appropriate weight. Avoid stressing the mare. Stress can cause a drop in progesterone, a hormone which helps maintain pregnancy. Illness and/or fever can cause the mare's system to secrete prostaglandins, which may cause abortion.

Use Good Judgment

- Transport your mare only if necessary.
- Use caution when exposing your mare to other horses to avoid any undue risk of injury or disease transmission.
- Provide nutritious forage, but don't overfeed. Supplementing with vitamins and minerals is unnecessary in mares being fed a balanced diet.
- Make sure the mare is current on vaccines and deworming.

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- Do not administer hormones or other drugs unless specifically prescribed by your equine practitioner.
- Carefully evaluate the mare before deciding whether to breed on foal heat. Consult your veterinarian.

Vaccinate

Vaccinations should be current, since infectious diseases can trigger abortions. A four-way inoculation for Eastern and Western encephalomyelitis, influenza and tetanus is recommended at the beginning of pregnancy. A booster should be given one month prior to foaling to increase the antibody level in the mare's colostrum (first milk) and help protect the newborn foal from disease. Also, the mare should be vaccinated for equine rhinopneumonitis (commonly called virus abortion or rhino) at five, seven and nine months' gestation. Consult with your local veterinarian regarding other vaccines that may be advisable in your area, such as rabies and botulism.

Deworming

Most deworming agents available today are relatively safe for pregnant mares. Consult your veterinarian to establish an effective and safe deworming schedule.

It is especially important to deworm within several weeks of foaling, because the mare will be the primary source for infecting her foal with parasites. Manure should be disposed of properly.

Changing Energy Needs

During the last four months of pregnancy, the foal will grow rapidly. To accommodate this growth, the mare's energy needs will increase. Even so, special nutritional supplements are probably unnecessary.

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Good-quality hay and forage should remain the bulk of the expectant mare's diet. Concentrated feeds, such as grains, may be added to the ration to bolster energy intake without adding excess bulk.

Use the mare's body condition as your guide to how she's faring. Adjust the ration accordingly. The mare should not become obese. Your veterinarian can advise you regarding a proper nutritional program.

Exercise during the last four months of the mare's pregnancy should be light to moderate. A pastured mare will get as much exercise as she needs just grazing. Vigorous exercise is not recommended.

Home Stretch

The average length of pregnancy in the mare is 338-343 days, but normal gestation can range from 320-380 days. You needn't become overly concerned if your mare is past due. Prolonged gestation is not generally associated with problems or extra large foals. If your mare's pregnancy extends much past 340 days or you're concerned, ask your veterinarian to examine her to confirm that all is well.

Suspected Abortion

Mares do occasionally abort. If you notice a vaginal discharge or dripping milk during pregnancy, contact your veterinarian. If you find the remains of a placenta or fetus, save it for your veterinarian to examine. It may be possible to ascertain the cause of abortion and treat the mare accordingly. Mares can and do abort without ill effects. However, it's always a good idea to have her checked by a veterinarian, because some complications of abortion, such as a retained placenta, can be life-threatening.

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Preparing for a Safe and Successful Foal Delivery

If your mare has made it through 11 months of pregnancy, you're almost home free. Labor and delivery, while momentous, are generally uneventful. In most cases, you will simply need to be a quiet observer--if, that is, you are lucky enough to witness the birth. Mares seem to prefer to foal at night in privacy, and apparently have some control over their delivery. Despite your frequent visits to the barn, your mare may give birth the minute you step away. While this is disappointing, don't worry. She is unlikely to need your help anyway. However, in case problems arise, keep your veterinarian's telephone number nearby.

A Safe Place to Foal

Your mare will need a clean, safe, quiet place to foal. Horses have been giving birth on the open range for eons, and this is still an acceptable choice. Allowing the mare to foal in the pasture even has some advantages. An open grassy area is likely to be cleaner than a stall and provides a healthy environment with adequate room to foal. You won't have to worry about the mare crowding into a corner or foaling too close to a wall. However, many owners prefer to confine the mare to observe her progress.

If foaling your mare in a stall, provide one that is a minimum of 14' x 14', with a floor that can be readily cleaned and disinfected. Dirt or clay floors make sanitation more difficult. Provide adequate clean bedding. Straw (particularly wheat straw) is preferable to shavings, as it won't cling to the wet newborn or mare the way small wood particles can. Remove manure and soiled bedding promptly; disinfect the stall between deliveries.

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Countdown

Most mares provide clues that they will soon give birth. Some mares may show all the signs like clockwork, others show practically none. The following are general guidelines, but be prepared for surprises:

- The mare's udder begins filling with milk 2-4 weeks prior to foaling.
- The muscles of the vulva and croup relax. The tailhead may become more prominent a few days prior to foaling.
- The teats become engorged 4-6 days prior to foaling.
- "Waxing" of the teats occurs. (A yellowish, honey-like secretion [colostrum] appears 1-4 days prior to foaling. The secretion may drip, and the udder may even drip milk several days prior to birth.)
- The mare becomes anxious and restless and may appear colicky. She may kick at her belly, pace, lie down and get up, look or bite at her flanks, and sweat. She may frequently raise her tail and urinate. Generally, this is the first stage of labor. (However, be aware that colic remains a possibility. If such behavior is prolonged for more than an hour or two without progress towards foaling, contact your veterinarian.)

Preparing for Birth

- Write down your veterinarian's phone number and keep it by all phones.
- Keep a watch or clock on hand so you can time each stage of labor. When you're worried or anxious, your perception of time becomes distorted. The watch will help you keep accurate track of the mare's progress during labor. Take written notes so that you won't have to rely on memory alone.
- Wrap the mare's tail with a clean wrap when you observe the first stage of labor. Be sure that the wrap is not applied too tightly or left on too long as it can cut off circulation and permanently damage the tail.
- Wash the mare's vulva and hindquarters with a mild soap and rinse thoroughly.

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- Clean and disinfect the stall as thoroughly as possible. Provide adequate bedding.
- Test strips that measure calcium in mammary secretions are available commercially. These strips aid the owner in predicting when the mare will foal because sudden increases in calcium are associated with imminent foaling.

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