

What to expect when your mare's expecting

Dr Brianna Clark BVSc MANZCVS (Equine Medicine)

As Spring approaches, excitement is building for the welcome of a new group of foals. Watching young foals play around in the pasture brings pure joy. But getting to this point can sometimes be a challenge. Most of the time all goes to plan, but sometimes things can awry. It helps to know ways in which your mare can be monitored and managed in the last few months to reduce the chances of problems occurring.

Prepare the Broodmare

It is crucial not to over-condition or over-feed your mare. This can bring a myriad of health issues, especially metabolic diseases and laminitis. Most the foal's growth occurs in the last trimester (from 8 months of pregnancy). So, your mare can be treated like any other horse until this period. A diet designed for the pregnant mare is ideal as it is balanced with appropriate energy, vitamins and minerals. She should also have free access to quality forage. The adequacy of her diet can be monitored with body condition scoring. When to stop riding your pregnant mare is a debatable topic. Generally, treat your mare like any other horse for the first 6 months of pregnancy with light work and training with nothing too strenuous which could put the mare and foal at risk.



Vaccinations should be current, in particular strangles and tetanus (Equivac 2-in-1). A booster vaccination should be given one month prior to foaling to increase the antibody levels in the mare's colostrum to help protect the newborn foal. If Equine Herpes Virus (EHV) is a risk on your property, your mare should be vaccinated against EHV-1 and EHV-4 strains. Other vaccinations which are important for your mare include Hendra virus. Ensuring your mare is up to date with her deworming protocol is important, especially in the last several weeks of pregnancy as she can be the source of worms infecting her foal. The mare should not be moved in the last six weeks prior to foaling as this can not only stress her and bring on early foaling, but is also crucial in giving enough time for her to build immunity, and pass antibodies onto the foal via colostrum, to local infectious agents in her area.

It is crucial to monitor your mare daily, and closer to the time twice daily, especially in the last few months of pregnancy. Check her vulva, mammary glands and general demeanour. Mares can occasionally abort. This can be caused by placentitis (infection of the placenta), viral diseases (such as Equine Herpes virus), presence of twins or uncommonly, processionary caterpillars. Early signs of abortion can include early mammary development, running milk, vulval discharge or signs consistent with foaling. Or she may show no signs at all. If you are concerned at all contact your vet immediately. If your mare does abort ensure you keep the foetus, membranes and mare separate from all other horses and contact your veterinarian.

It is not unusual for a late term pregnant mare to be sluggish, eat less and generally be less energetic. She may also develop swelling under her belly, which is normal. Generally, reduce any stress in the last few weeks of pregnancy. If she has a caslick in place, get your veterinarian to remove it close to foaling.

Impending foaling

The average length of a mare's pregnancy is 345 days but there can be a wide variation in normal from 320 to 380 days. Normally, an individual mare will have a similar pregnancy length every time. There are typical changes in the

mare as foaling becomes close. Her mammary glands begin to enlarge (two to four weeks pre-foaling) and wax will appear on the teats (one to four days pre-foaling). Her vulva will become softer and longer and the muscles of her croup will soften and flatten. Changes in milk electrolytes and pH may help predict foaling but depending on the test this can be unreliable and testing can be difficult. Monitoring for all these changes is important but how close the changes are to foaling can be quite variable. This means that predicting foaling to the day can often be a bit challenging, and it is recommended to use foaling alarms close to the mare's due date. It is always a good idea to monitor the mare's foaling, as things can go wrong in a matter of minutes.

As foaling season begins to approach it is crucial to be aware of the management your pregnant mare may need. Eleven months is an awful long time to wait to have something go wrong with the potential to have devastating effects on the foal and or your mare.