



Ballybrown Equine Clinic



Ballybrown Equine Clinic, Ballybrown, Clarina, Co. Limerick, Ireland.

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EXPECTANT MARE

Assuring the Health and Well-Being of the Pregnant Mare

We often think of pregnancy as a delicate and fragile condition. When it comes to horses, this perception is perhaps due to the mare's relatively poor reproductive performance in comparison to other domestic animals. However, in a natural setting, the mare does comparatively well reproductively. Therefore, this seemingly poor performance is due as much to improper management as to any reproductive deficiency. Fortunately, management is something we can control.

As a conscientious owner, you probably have many questions about caring for your expectant mare. Proper nutrition, deworming, exercise and vaccinations will help to ensure a healthy pregnancy, and you can look forward to the birth of your foal with greater confidence.

PRECARIOUS BEGINNINGS

The earliest days of an embryo's existence are perhaps the most precarious. During the first 30 days, there is a 10-15% chance that the embryo will be resorbed. Stress, illness, uterine infection, hormonal abnormalities, the presence of twins and other factors have been implicated in early embryonic loss. Often, the cause remains undetermined.

When the mare conceives, the fertilized egg travels down the fallopian tubes and enters the uterus around day 6/7. It migrates throughout the uterus until about day 16 and typically implants into the uterine wall at 16-18 days. By day 16, the embryonic vesicle is usually large enough to detect by ultrasonic examinations, therefore it is highly recommended to confirm pregnancy at this stage and, if need be, deal with twin embryos.

Neither palpation, nor ultrasound examinations have been shown to harm the developing embryo or endanger the pregnancy. However, because of the embryo's uncertain beginning, it may be wise to have the pregnancy reconfirmed 28, 42 and 63 days post ovulation.

TROUBLESOME TWINS

We recommend an ultrasound exam at 14-16 days post ovulation to detect twins. Early detection provides an opportunity to eliminate one embryo, thus allowing the other to develop normally. This is commonly done because twins pose a number of risks:

- In 95% of mares with twin embryos, one or both embryos are resorbed or aborted during the first 60 days. However, waiting to see if this occurs naturally could delay or interfere with a subsequent pregnancy.
- Of the small percentage of twins that survive in utero past 50 days, it is highly unlikely that two healthy foals will be born. If either survives, it may be small and weak.
- Most twins surviving past 50 days will spontaneously abort at 6-8 months.

- Mares carrying twins are more likely to give birth prematurely (before 300-320 days). Premature foals may have serious medical problems and are less likely to survive.

HELPING NATURE TAKE ITS COURSE

Good broodmare management is the best aid for helping the mare make it 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 mares of appropriate weight.

Avoid stressing the mare as much as possible. Stress can cause a drop in progesterone, a hormone which helps maintain pregnancy. Illness/fever can cause the mare's system to produce prostaglandins, which may cause abortion.

USE GOOD JUDGEMENT

- Transport your mare only if necessary.
- Use caution when exposing your mare to other horses. You should avoid any undue risk of injury or disease transmission by isolating broodmares from transient horse populations.
- 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 vaccinations and deworming. Consult Ballybrown Equine Clinic regarding specific vaccinations and deworming intervals during pregnancy.
- Do not administer hormones or other drugs unless specifically prescribed by Ballybrown Equine Clinic.
- Carefully evaluate the mare before deciding whether to breed on the first cycle following foaling commonly referred to as "foal-heat".

COASTING THROUGH MIDDLE PREGNANCY

Unless there are special circumstances, during the first 7 months of pregnancy, treat your mare as you would a non-pregnant one. She will benefit from moderate riding or exercise. Rations should be composed primarily of high quality forage in approximately the same as pre-pregnancy amounts. Extremes in weather can alter her nutritional requirements and should be taken into account when formulating the ration. She should always have plenty of clean, fresh water. The mare will also benefit from routine hoof and dental care, standard vaccinations and regular deworming.

VACCINES

Vaccinations should be current since infectious diseases can trigger abortion. Vaccination against influenza and tetanus is essential. Also, the mare should be vaccinated for equine virus abortion (Herpesvirus I & IV) at 5, 7 and 9 months of pregnancy. Consult with Ballybrown Equine Clinic about other vaccinations which may be advisable in your area, such as rotavirus.

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DEWORMING

Most deworming agents available today are relatively safe for pregnant mares. Consult with our deworming advice section to establish an effective and safe deworming schedule for your mare.

It is especially important to deworm your mare within a few hours of foaling, because the mare will be the primary source for infecting her foal with parasites. Of course, manure should always be disposed of properly.

CHANGING NEEDS

During the last 4 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. 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. Ballybrown Equine Clinic can advise you regarding a proper nutritional program for your mare.

Exercise during the last four months of the mare's pregnancy should be light. In fact, 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. You need not become overly concerned if your mare is past her due date. If your mare's pregnancy extends much past 340 days ask your vet to examine her to determine if the mare is still pregnant and confirm that all is well.

SUSPECTED ABORTION

Mares do occasionally abort. If you notice a vaginal discharge or dripping milk during pregnancy, contact Ballybrown Equine Clinic. If you find the remains of a placenta or foetus, keep it for your vet 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 your vet, because of the possibility of an infectious cause and some complications of abortion, such as retained placenta, can be life-threatening to your horse.

IMPENDING BIRTH

There are obvious as well as subtle signs of impending birth. The time frame during which they occur varies from mare to mare. The most obvious and reliable are:

1. Filling of the udder (2-4 weeks pre-foaling).
2. Distention of the teats (4-6 days pre-foaling).

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3. Waxing of the teats (1-4 days pre-foaling).
4. Obvious dripping of milk.

More subtle signs include:

1. Softening and flattening of the muscles in the croup.
2. Relaxation of the vulva.
3. Visible changes in the position of the foal.

PREPARING FOR BIRTH

Your eleven month waiting game will be over before you know it. Ballybrown Equine Clinic will be able to answer any questions you may have about caring for your mare at this stage.