

The foaling mare

By Matt Hanks BVSc MRCVS, Central Equine Vets

Mares are seasonal breeders which means they only cycle during the spring and summer months. If you are planning to breed, there are some simple things to do before picking your stallion:

1. Ensure your mare is not overweight as this can alter fertility and make birth harder.
2. But do not starve your mare as the first thing to switch off if food is scarce is the reproductive system.
3. Ensure your mare is free from other disease or lameness and is fully vaccinated.
4. If you are sending your mare to a stud, they may have some specific requirements for entry such as blood tests and swabs. Check with your stud and give yourself plenty of time to get the results back.

Your mare can be naturally served (stallion mounting the mare) or bred using artificial insemination. The semen used can either be chilled or frozen and is sent in the post just before you need it. If you are breeding at home, I would advise chilled semen as this is easier, cheaper and has good conception rates.

A mare's fertility will start to decline around 12 years, so an old mare (>15 years) could need more attempts before she conceives and at £300-400 per cycle, the costs can quickly mount.

To ensure your mare does not have any infections which may interfere with her getting pregnant, a swab may be taken from her genital area and her uterus (womb). Ultrasound is commonly used to look at the reproductive tract of your

mare to see if there are any abnormalities and to estimate the mare's stage of cycle. In as little as 15 days after breeding, your vet can use ultrasound to see if she has conceived.

Gestation length

The average gestation length (duration of pregnancy) of mares is 335 to 340 days, but can range from 320 to 370 days, which is well over a year.

The birth

Most mares (>95%) will give birth without complication if left unattended. Mares give birth 'explosively' - it can all be over in 15 minutes or so.

Preparations for foaling

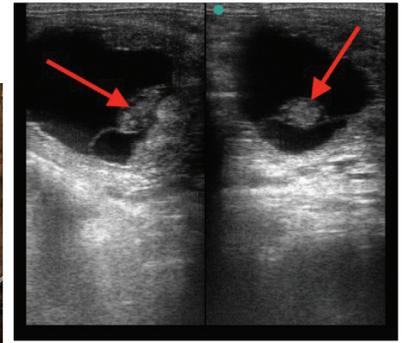
Ideally, mares should be placed in the foaling environment two to three weeks prior to her expected date as any sudden changes may delay foaling.

Whatever the choice of foaling locations, the environment should be clean, have adequate space, and be reasonably quiet. Mares due to foal in the cooler months will require a large (14' X 14' minimum), clean foaling stall. During warm weather, many producers choose to allow their mares to foal in grassy paddocks or pastures.

The mare should be allowed ample exercise up to foaling. Stall confinement for an extended period just prior to foaling may predispose the mare to impaction colic and abnormal swelling.

Early signs

The classical signs include udder development beginning two to



Ultrasound scans of two 40 day pregnancies, shown by the red arrows

six weeks before foaling, then milk let down into the teats four to six days prior to parturition (birth). The ends of the teats become covered over and the mare is said to be 'waxing' which occurs one to two days before foaling. At this time, some mares will have occasional dripping or streaming of colostrum. If this streaming is continuous, the colostrum should be collected and stored for possible use with the newborn foal.

Parturition-Stage I

Typically the mare will exhibit the following: restlessness, pawing the ground, getting up and down frequently, sweating in the flanks, urinating frequently.

Parturition-Stage II

This is when the foal actually appears. If foaling is proceeding normally, the mare should be left to do it on her own. This second stage, hard labour and foal delivery, is usually completed in 10 to 30 minutes. Stage II ends following birth when the umbilical cord is broken as the mare stands or the foal struggles.

To avoid infection, dip the stump of the umbilical cord in iodine solution, and repeat the process several times during the first few days of life. This will help prevent bacteria invasion into the body via the navel stump (navel-ill).

Parturition-Stage III

The final stage of parturition, Stage III, is the delivery of the placenta (afterbirth). These membranes, which surround the foal during gestation, should be expelled three to four hours after delivery. Once expelled, the placenta should be examined to determine if it is intact or if any portions may have been detached. Placenta retention can be a problem, leading to uterine infection and/or laminitis (founder). If your mare has not expelled her placenta by around five hours, call your vet.

After foaling, the foal should stand and nurse within two hours. Colostrum intake is very important and it is essential that the foal drinks at least one to two litres of milk in the first eight hours of life. If the foal has had a few drinks and then lays down with a full tummy, then you know he is fine.

If you have any concerns about breeding your mare, please call your vet or call Central Equine Vets on 0131 6645606



Central Equine Veterinary Services Ltd

Edinburgh: 0131 664 5606

Kinross: 01577 863333

info@centralequinevets.co.uk - www.centralequinevets.co.uk

