

Care of Your Pregnant Mare

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The time leading up to the highly anticipated arrival of a new foal can be very exciting, but may also be a cause for anxiety. Whether this is your first foal or whether you have bred many foals, it is important to be aware of the care your mare needs during her pregnancy to ensure it goes as smoothly as possible.

The average gestation period in the mare is 340 days, although there is a normal variation of 20 days either side of this time. During this time, all your usual preventative medicine practices should be maintained, such as regular administration of anthelmintics (wormers), good nutrition, vaccinations, dental and hoof care.

Nutrition

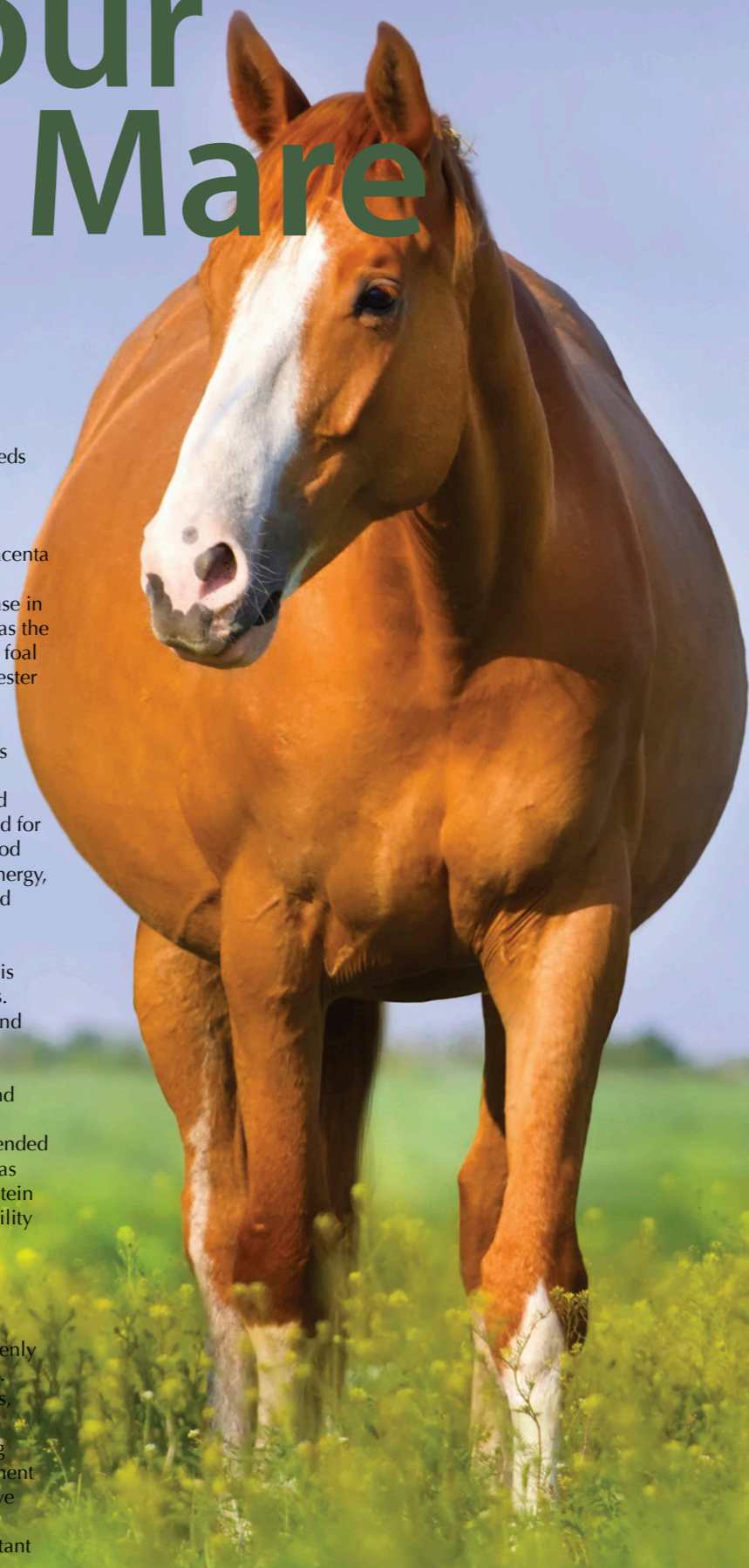
During pregnancy, the mare's diet needs to provide nutrients to support the maintenance of the mare's body and formation of the foetus, placenta and mammary gland. The foal and the placenta require additional nutrients as they develop during pregnancy and increase in energy intake can be started as early as the fifth month of gestation, although the foal gains the most weight in the last trimester of pregnancy.

If the pregnant mare is thin, she needs to be fed appropriately to increase her body condition before foaling and lactation. A high quality feed designed for the pregnant mare should contain good quality and quantity of protein and energy, and balanced quantity of vitamins and minerals.

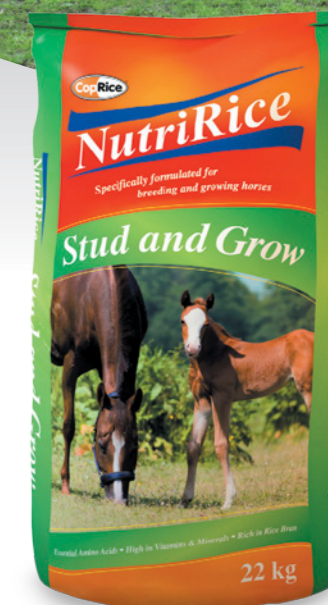
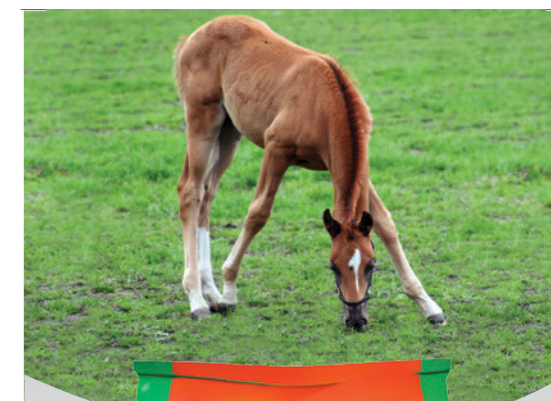
Access to pasture is important as this is an excellent source of many nutrients. She should be fed good quality hay and enough concentrate to meet nutrient needs. In the last trimester, it may be beneficial to provide extra vitamin and mineral supplementation based on deficiencies in her diet. It is recommended to feed legume or legume grass hays as they are usually higher in energy, protein and calcium, and have better palatability than grass hays.

Hoof care

Care of a mare's feet should not suddenly be neglected when she goes into foal. Mares with pre-existing foot problems, such as laminitis, may become worse with the increased weight gain during pregnancy, and appropriate management must be employed to control excessive weight gain and manage the foot condition. Regular trimming is important and care needs to be taken to avoid overly aggressive trimming which may result in sensitive soles for a few days post trimming.



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LEFT: Access to pasture is not only important for ensuring your mare has the nutrients she needs, but also for her mental health during pregnancy.

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Photo by Karen Lyon

Dental care

Regular dentals throughout a horse's life are essential to catch any teeth problems early and ensure their mouth is comfortable to allow them to eat properly. It is recommended to have your mare's teeth examined and any problems addressed either before she is in foal or in the early first part of her pregnancy.

Exercise

In the normal healthy pregnant mare, regular light exercise throughout her pregnancy is beneficial to maintain muscle tone, fitness and mental health. Heavy work or stressful situations should be avoided, if possible. If exercise is not possible, turning the mare out onto pasture for the majority of the day is of great benefit.

Anthelmintics

It is important to maintain good internal parasite control through pasture management, anthelmintic rotation and faecal egg counts to ensure internal parasites are not causing an extra drain of nutrients from your pregnant mare or any other health issues.

Vaccinations

Vaccinations and preventing the spread of infectious disease are especially important if you have a pregnant mare on your property. For example, equine herpes virus 1 and 4 that may affect young weaned foals or horses in work, can also lead to abortion in exposed pregnant mares so separation of these groups is important. Up to date vaccination against tetanus is essential. Pregnant mares should receive their annual booster or the last of a primary course 4-6 weeks before foaling to maximise these antibodies in the mare's colostrum.

Other possible vaccinations that should be considered and discussed with your veterinarian based on regional risk are strangles, rotavirus to boost colostrum immunity for the foal, equine herpes virus used during pregnancy to prevent abortion and Hendra virus vaccination.

Signs of problems and potential management

During pregnancy, the mare should be monitored closely for signs that may indicate health problems with the mare or the foal. This may include premature udder development, premature lactation,

ABOVE: A healthy diet with plenty of forage, regular dental checks and hoof care are essential aspects of managing the broodmare during the gestation period when the foal's organs and its body are developing.

vaginal discharge and ventral oedema. Premature udder and milk development or the dripping of milk from the udder some time prior to foaling may be the earliest indication there is a problem with the foetus or the placenta. Problems may include impending abortion, death of the foetus or a twin, placental separation or placentitis (infection of the placenta).

Knowing the history of your mare's previous pregnancies is helpful to alert you to any prior problems your mare may have had. Mares that have previously had placentitis and are considered to have high risk pregnancies may require regular ultrasonographic monitoring, either transrectally or transabdominally by a veterinarian to evaluate the health of the placenta and the foal. The treatment of placentitis usually includes broad spectrum antibiotics, supplementation with a long acting altrenogest or progesterone preparation, and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

Regular dentals throughout a horse's life are essential to catch any teeth problems early and ensure their mouth is comfortable to allow them to eat properly, including during pregnancy.

Leading up to the impending foaling date, there can be many sleepless nights waiting for your mare to foal. If your mare has had a caslick operation done, this usually should be removed 2-3 weeks before the foaling date. Most foalings happen overnight, however, this is certainly not always the case. It is difficult to predict when exactly a mare will foal and, apart from monitoring physical signs such as udder development, waxing at the tip of the teats, relaxation of the sacrosciatic ligaments on either side of the top of the tail and changes in behaviour, there are tests on the mare's milk which can help predict the timing of the impending foaling.

Serial monitoring of the pH level of the milk or the calcium carbonate level of the milk may help in predicting when the mare may be ready to foal, or how viable the foal would be if she did foal. However, none of these are fool-proof. Another good tool that may reduce the number of sleepless nights is a foaling alarm. Several different types exist, but the most commonly used type are attached to the mare's halter and are activated when in a prolonged horizontal or 'lying down' position which then sounds the alarm remotely. Unfortunately, again, this is not fool-proof and there can still be many sleepless nights due to false alarms!

Although there seems to be many problems that could occur during your mare's pregnancy, with diligent care, the majority of pregnancies go smoothly and the arrival of a new foal is a very happy and exciting time, so look forward to it and enjoy the moment when it comes!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sarah Van Dyk, BVSc (Hons) - Mixed Animal Veterinarian. Sarah worked at WestVETS as an afterhours nurse in her last year of studies at UQ. Upon graduation in 2009, Sarah worked in Armidale, New South Wales in mixed practice for some time before re-joining the team at WestVETS as a mixed animal veterinarian. Her special interests are small animal surgery, farm animal medicine and surgery, and equine medicine and reproduction. She also enjoys being attending veterinarian at endurance rides and other equestrian events. In her spare time, she enjoys snowsports, art, horse riding and long distance running.



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