

# Preparing Your Mare For Pregnancy

By Katelyn McNicol, BVSc  
WestVETS Animal Hospital &  
Reproduction Centre

**S**o, you've decided to make the big step and add another four legged lawn mower to your family. But what now? What do you need to do to get your mare ready to carry your new foal?

The first thing to consider is whether a new foal is the best option for your family. Factors such as the cost of insemination, post-natal care of the foal and ongoing costs need to be seriously considered. For more information about the costs of pregnancy and care of your new born foal, please contact your veterinarian.

Once you have decided to take the step to pregnancy, a thorough health check of your mare by a veterinarian is required. This will involve a general physical exam, as well as a reproductive exam.

## Physical exam

The purpose of a general physical exam is to identify any health issues that may compromise your mare's ability to conceive, then carry a foal to term and then support the foal for a further six months until weaning. Of particular note are any lameness that will be exacerbated by the additional weight of pregnancy or that may worsen over the 17 months needed to grow and raise a foal.

A dental exam is essential to identify any pathology that will compromise the mare's ability to gain weight during pregnancy and maintain condition whilst lactating. More importantly, it will identify any dental disease. Dental disease is caused by spaces between or beside the teeth where food can become lodged and begin to rot.

The bacteria in this rotting feed then enters the blood stream through the inflamed gingiva causing a constant bacteraemia. This means your horse's internal organs and tissues are constantly assaulted by a barrage of bacteria. Unfortunately, a favourite place for bacteria to settle is the placenta resulting in infection (placentitis). Placentitis can result in abortion, premature birth and a septic foal and is, unfortunately, quite common, so anything that can be done to reduce your mare's chances of developing this condition should be jumped upon.

## Reproductive exam

The reproductive exam will look at your mare's reproductive tract, in particular her conformation, and ability to conceive and maintain a pregnancy. A significant route of infection for placentitis is ascending infection, i.e. one which comes through the vulva and into the uterus. There are three significant barriers to this infection.

**The vulva:** The first barrier is the vulva. It is important the vulval lips sit tightly together and that the angle of the vulva relative to the anus is as vertical as possible. If there is a gap in the vulval lips or if there is a negative angle to the vulva, contaminants, such as faeces, can easily enter. If your mare has any faults in this area, a caslick can be performed soon after insemination whereby the vulval lips are partially sutured together. This will need to be opened one month prior to foaling.

**The vestibulo-vaginal seal:** The second barrier is between the vulva and the cervix. The tissue in this area should sit closely together. A fault in this seal will not only let contaminants into the reproductive tract, but also air which can irritate the tract and uterus. This seal can be assessed by your veterinarian by parting the vulval lips, as well as with a speculum.



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The cervix: The third barrier is the cervix. The cervix can be damaged from previous foalings and should be examined by your veterinarian via a speculum.

A speculum exam will also help identify a mare with 'urine pooling'. This is where the mare's reproductive tract sits in a downward angle within the pelvis allowing urine to flow backwards towards the cervix. This examination will also identify any adhesions in the vagina and vestibule, which may have developed after previous foalings.

Transrectal ultrasound examination will allow assessment of the uterus and ovaries to check for any abnormalities that may reduce your mare's chances of conceiving. If there are concerns regarding the health of the uterus, additional tests, such as uterine swabs and biopsies, can be performed.



A diastema (gap) between two premolars where feed can become lodged and begin to rot. Image courtesy WestVETS Animal Hospital & Reproduction Centre.

### Reproductive history

Knowing the reproductive history of your mare can be very useful for future pregnancies. Knowing whether she has had problems with early embryonic loss, late term abortions, placentitis, difficulties conceiving or premature foals can be vital information for your veterinarian and will change the management of her pregnancy.

### Nutrition

Nutrition is, of course, an essential component of pregnancy and lactation. It should be obvious that a mare that is underweight will have more difficulties conceiving and maintaining an early pregnancy, compared to a horse of a healthy weight. Your mare needs to be on a rising plane of nutrition during her pregnancy, i.e. needs to be steadily putting on weight.

This means that although we do not

want an underweight mare, we also do not want an overweight mare. An overweight mare who continues to put on weight during pregnancy will increase your chances of difficulties during foaling and, therefore, may lead to the death of your foal. A pregnant mare should never have to be in the position of going 'on a diet' at the expense of the nutrition and development of the foal. Your veterinarian can guide you through any nutrition or weight concerns you may have.

### Dating

Next, you need to decide on how your mare will be getting pregnant. The options are natural service, chilled semen or frozen semen. Each have their own advantages and disadvantages, and should be discussed with your veterinarian in light of your horse's particular situation.

If natural service is desired, additional test can sometimes be required, such as clitoral swabs.

It is worth noting that if there are any significant concerns raised by your veterinarian regarding your mare's ability to carry a foal to full term, embryo transfer is an option to consider. This will involve your mare being able to conceive, but then the embryo being transferred into a recipient mare to grow and raise the foal.

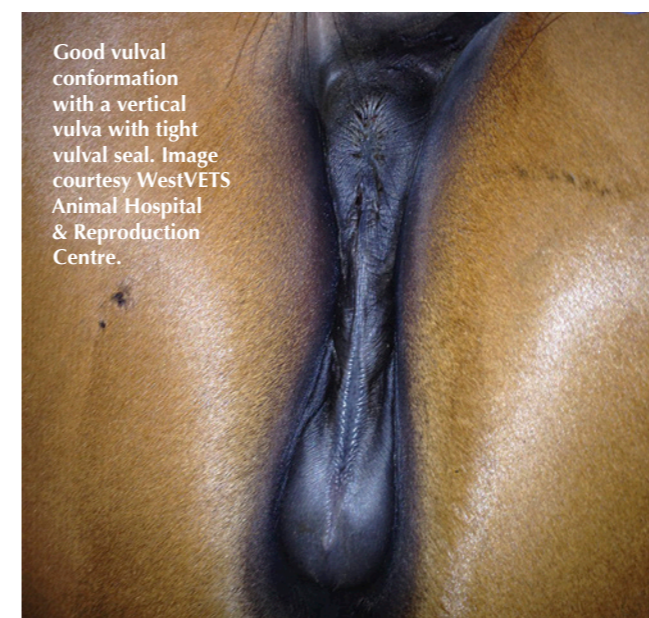
### Vaccinations

Vaccinations are very important. When the foal is born, they have a naïve immune system with no immunity against the infectious challenges they will face and, therefore, depend 100% on the colostrum they receive from the mare to protect them until they produce their own anti-bodies.

The mare's colostrum contains anti-bodies that she has developed as a result of infections she has had to overcome.

Vaccinations are used to make the mare's body produce anti-bodies against specific viruses and bacteria. The most common vaccinations are Tetanus and Strangles, but there are other helpful vaccines against Equine Herpes Virus, Rotavirus and Salmonella.

A fleshly floated mouth. Image courtesy WestVETS Animal Hospital & Reproduction Centre.



Good vulval conformation with a vertical vulva with tight vulval seal. Image courtesy WestVETS Animal Hospital & Reproduction Centre.



Poor vulval conformation with a negative vulval angle and high risk of faecal contamination. Image courtesy WestVETS Animal Hospital & Reproduction Centre.

Equine Herpes Virus can cause abortion in the mare and respiratory infections in the foal, whilst Rotavirus and Salmonella can cause diarrhoea in the foal. The timing of these vaccines are important in order to give your mare the strongest anti-bodies in the colostrum. These vaccinations and their timing should be discussed with your veterinarian.

The Hendra vaccine is recommended for every horse and its use in your mare can be discussed with your veterinarian.

Investing the time and effort in ensuring your mare is ready and capable for pregnancy will help ensure your breeding experience is as stress free as possible and, therefore, enjoyed for the amazing experience that it is!



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** After graduating with honours in 2009 from the University of Queensland, Katelyn McNicol joined the WESTVets team as a mixed animal veterinarian. Although Katelyn loves all animals, her true passion is horses, being particularly interested in medicine and anaesthesia. Katelyn has also undertaken further study in equine dentistry and she is dedicated to the science of balancing a horse's teeth to enhance health, nutrition and performance.



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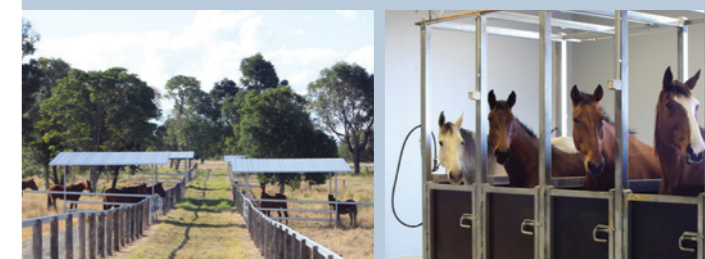


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