

Healthy Broodmares Produce Healthy Foals

Nutrition and Dentistry Go Hand In Hand

The art of feeding a pregnant mare is easily overlooked. The development of a healthy foal is crucial to today's breeders and as a result, nutrition plays a large role. Research has found that pregnant mares are unable to maintain a healthy pregnancy on pastures alone.

Horses in the wild are not restricted by the size of paddocks and are free to roam and graze on average 16 – 18 hours per day. On the other hand, domesticated mares are restricted to smaller paddocks, which are normally not maintained and overgrazed. Therefore the mare relies purely on humans to provide the requirements for their health and well-being.

On return from service, pregnant mares need to be fed according to their home environment. Paddock pastures should provide sufficient nutrition for the first three – four months of the mare's pregnancy. However, should the mare's grazing be confined to drought affected or overgrazed pastures, then alternative feeds need to be considered.

The quality of grass in the paddock can depend on seasonal changes and the amount of rain that was received during the growing period. Winter months, being the least nutritious, will mean the pregnant mare's diet will require additional supplements.

Silage (hay) and grass is an essential part of the diet as this is the major source of fibre, which is required for digestion. However, when there is insufficient grass in the paddocks the addition of good quality silage is vital. The quantity of silage given to the horse can be altered according to the condition and availability of grass in the paddocks.

One should be careful not to supplement the mare's diet with poor quality silage because not only does it contain more fungal spores than good quality silage but also higher dust content. This can lead to respiratory infections and also have a negative effect on the condition of the pregnant mare.

In addition to maintaining her own condition, the mare is also providing a complete new bone structure, sensory organisation and internal systems to the foetus. The building materials required to perform this task comprise mainly of proteins, starches, fats, various minerals, vitamins and fibrous roughage, which are solely derived from the mare's diet. Each building material play's its own vital role in the development of the foetus eg. calcium for bone formation.

During pregnancy the foetus grows by drawing nutrients from the mare's body. High protein feeds will assist the mare to provide these nutrients whilst, maintaining her own condition.

The danger with mares who do not receive adequate building blocks in their diet can lead to abnormalities in the development in the foal such as; bone and hoof deformation, damaged joints and underweight foals. This neglect to the mare's diet will also affect the foal during its first critical weeks of development, as the mare will be unable to provide sufficient nutrition through lactation. The mare herself will also fall victim to this malnutrition, which can lead to further complications.

All owners/breeders should determine their mare's current dietary intake and in turn formulate a balanced diet to suit their horse's specific needs.

Once a diet has been formulated the next step is to determine whether or not the mare will be able to effectively masticate the feed.

The horse's mouth forms a vital part of the digestive system. When food is not masticated effectively by the pregnant mare, it will result in poor absorption of the nutrients in the feed causing overall poor body condition. Consultation by a qualified equine dentist will highlight any issues that may be present in the mare's mouth.

Many owners are unaware of how important dental health is to their horse.

Managing and maintaining their oral condition is an integral part of their well being. Our ancestors were aware that the working lives of many horses were reduced due to dental disease. Therefore it is essential that regular dentistry be considered throughout your horse's life.

Domestication has increased the need for dentistry in horses, as the foliage in today's paddocks does not contain the same quality and quantity of fibres that were present in pastures a century ago. Horse's teeth grow on average 2mm per year throughout the life span of the horse. This creates sharpness on the molars (grinding teeth).

'Unlike our teeth, the horse's teeth continue to grow during most of their life. The upper molars (grinding teeth) are wider than the lower molars and because feed is much different today, it means that the teeth wear differently and the outside edges of the upper molars and the inside edges of the lower molars get very sharp. These sharp edges need to be correctly filed to prevent damage to the cheeks and tongue. Additionally, where there is the common problem of abnormal wear this can be improved by filing.' – Peter Borgdorff, Equine Dentist

Long fibred silage can aid in the wearing of horses teeth, however horses that are being fed processed feeds are unable to wear away the developing sharpness on the molars. Therefore filing (floating) of the grinding surface is crucial. If sharpness is not filed, cheek and tongue lacerations as well as poor mastication can occur.

In order to avoid abnormalities or severe wear patterns, it is important to ensure that regular dental checks form part of the overall health program.

Qualified equine dentists have the training and expertise to diagnose and treat oral conditions and diseases.

An indication of a dental problem in the horse's mouth include: dropping or spilling of feed, quidding (packing of feed inside the cheeks), thick saliva, washing the mouth repeatedly in water, bad breath, turning head to one side whilst eating, head shaking and slow eating.

To sum up, a healthy diet and regular veterinary and dental checks will go a long way to producing a healthy foal. And remember, once your foal has been born, get your dentist to check the jaw and teeth alignment for early detection of any potential problems.