

Taking care of your pregnant mare

Feeding your mare properly

Broodmares without a foal already at foot don't need extra feed until their last few months, when extra energy is needed. However, right from the time of service, you need to make sure she's getting quality food and special vitamins needed by a growing foal. Khonke's Own make a complete vitamin/mineral for growing horses, but we also feed our mares good quality lucerne chaff and rolled barley, with a tablespoon a week of cod liver oil and a tablespoon a day of cider vinegar with garlic in the last few months.

Vaccination and worming

Pregnant mares pass on their immunity to their growing foals, but they can also pass on illnesses and parasites like worms. It's always best to keep them away from new horses and youngsters, who are also more prone to diseases like equine herpes, and to ensure you have a good vaccination and worming program in place. As a bare minimum, your mare should regularly have a complete wormer safe for mares in foal, and her annual tetanus vaccine two months before she's due to foal. Herpes and Salmonella vaccines can also be considered, but they are expensive and don't replace good quarantine of new horses.

Her physical condition

A mare should maintain her normal condition of body fat (no ribs visible, but easily felt) during pregnancy, as well as normal farrier (a trim every 8 weeks) and dentist attention each year. She shouldn't be rugged, however, for her safety and that of her foal, so make sure she gets to grow a winter coat by leaving her un-rugged from the start of March. She can be safely ridden up to the point she's obviously too big, but she should continue to get free exercise in a safe paddock.

Getting ready to foal

Mares tend to foal at night, away from prying eyes and the other horses. Once they start showing signs of getting ready to foal, they're best separated from the other horses in the foaling paddock, where you can check them regularly, but make sure they can still see the rest of the herd. It's safest to have a level, well-grassed and sheltered paddock rather than a stable, which has to be disinfected and large enough to prevent injury to mare or foal when they're down. Not everyone is lucky enough to have one of these next to the house, but you will find many studs can provide this for you at a reasonable fee.

Foaling

Mares can make it safely through the pregnancy only to lose the foal during the birth or first few days, when the foal is most vulnerable. The first signs are usually 'bagging up' or getting milk and softening of the muscles around the tail a few weeks out. The foal's only days away when the mare has 'wax' or colostrum on her teats, so we clean her udder and vulva and bandage her tail in preparation. When she starts to look anxiously around and at her belly, you know it's time. Leave her alone and watch from a distance. If all goes well, it will all be over in 20 minutes! Have your kit prepared, plus the after-hours vet number just in case.