



*Considerations When Breeding Your Mare*  
By Megan Williams, DVM

Its quickly approaching the time of year that many people are considering breeding their mare. With the current economic situation and the drastic increase in the unwanted horse population, creating a new equine life needs to be carefully considered. There are a number of important factors to take into consideration, and we will discuss only a few now.

One of the most important and most obvious considerations is the reproductive ability of your mare and stallion. Every horse is different when it comes to their inherent ability to reproduce. One person may tell you that their mare got pregnant the first time they exposed them to a stallion, and the next person will tell a terrible tale of how it took them multiple tries, and multiple years just to get one foal. The capability of a mare to produce a foal rides on a large number of factors other than simple exposure to the stallion. For the most part, mares are the most reproductively fit when they are under the age of 12 years old. The older a mare gets, the more problems she is likely to encounter both in conceiving and in giving birth. Many mares being bred are retired athletes, and therefore tend to be older, and often their reproductive history may not be known. Knowing if the mare had a foal in the past and if there were complications with the foaling will be an important place to start.

Once you have knowledge of the mare's reproductive history, the next step is getting to know your mare's cycle. How often is she coming into heat? The average mare will have a 21-day cycle. During transition times, such as fall and spring, their heat cycle can become more erratic and will be harder to follow. Also, inflammation within the uterus can make the mare have an erratic cycle. Some mares are not demonstrative and will require more work to determine the optimum time to breed. Having your veterinarian do reproductive ultrasounds will provide you with a wealth of information. Each ovary needs to be closely examined and follicle (where the egg will be released from) size and health determined. The size of follicle that a mare ovulates on is often mare dependent, and certain breeds (like Thoroughbreds) are predisposed to ovulate more than one follicle. If you are using shipped or frozen semen, this is especially important. When using frozen semen, your most effective time to breed is within 6 hours of ovulation either 6 hours prior or 6 hours post. Certain drugs have been designed to induce a mare to ovulate within a general time frame; however, they are most effective when given to a mare with a follicle over a certain size.

While performing an ultrasound exam of the uterus, the veterinarian will also evaluate the endometrium (the inside of the uterus). When a mare is under the influence of estrogen (in a strong heat), they develop edema within their uterus. This can be used as a marker for breeding time as well. Older mares and mares with poor reproductive conformation often

hold fluid or urine within their uterus which may increase while they are in heat. Neither semen nor the unfertilized egg will survive for long in this unhealthy environment. If the ovaries and uterus look normal, and the mare is still unable to become pregnant, uterine cytology or culture can be extremely beneficial in determining the use.

With the mare carefully examined to ensure a good reproductive outcome, the next and equally as important consideration is the stallion. These days, you can breed to many of the world's top stallions through the advances in artificial insemination, and your mare will never leave your property. The benefit is that superior genetic ability can now be obtained far easier than ever before. The disadvantage is that certain stallions only collect on certain days of the week and the semen quality may decrease with the amount of time it is shipped. Finding out from the stallion owner/breeder how the semen holds up to shipping or freezing is extremely important. There are certain stallions that have semen that isn't capable of surviving the freezing process or dies quickly when in the shipping medium. If this is the case, it becomes vitally important that your mare be as close to ovulating as possible to increase the probability of becoming pregnant or you may need to change the stallion choice.

All-in-all, the decision to breed a mare needs to be carefully made. Not only are the associated financial costs high, there is the inherent risk associated with foaling, and the time and management required through the process is great. That said, a happy and healthy mare and foal is a beautiful sight to see.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email [info@brandonequine.com](mailto:info@brandonequine.com) with any questions regarding this topic.

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