

Q & A - Guaranteeing High-Quality Milk

I am a first-time breeder, and my maiden mare is due to foal early in the year. So far, her pregnancy has been uneventful. How can I ensure that she produces high-quality milk for her foal?

Sound prenatal nutrition is instrumental in the production of nutritious milk. Because it constitutes the majority of the foal's diet for the first 60 days of life, milk must be both nutritious and abundant, so a healthy concern for your mare's maternal capabilities is to be respected. Rest assured, however, that mares are nearly infallible in their ability to produce adequate milk.

During the first two months of lactation, mares will produce approximately 3-4% of their body weight in milk daily. For a 1,100-pound mare, that equates to 33 to 44 pounds of milk per day. A gallon of milk bought at the grocery weighs about eight pounds. Using this as a gauge, mares in this weight range yield approximately four or five gallons of milk daily, though output is ultimately dependent on the individual.

Mares fed sufficient dietary energy throughout gestation and lactation should have no problem manufacturing enough milk of appropriate nutrient composition to nourish a foal. Even mares that are in suboptimal body condition continue to produce high-quality milk until their energy reserves are depleted. At this point, milk quantity decreases but quality does not.

How can you, as a small breeder, assure that your mare is receiving top-tier nutrition? First, be certain she is offered the highest quality forage available, be it pasture, hay, or a combination of both. Do not assume that mares need rich hay such as alfalfa purely because they are pregnant. While it's true that legumes such as alfalfa often contain more energy and minerals than other forages, an energy surplus can leave mares overweight. Mares should be kept in moderate body condition (ribs felt but not seen), and outright obesity should be avoided.

Second, in this age of duty-specific feeds, it is imperative that you choose a feed formulated specifically for mares in late pregnancy and lactation. Feeds created by reputable companies normally have sufficient nutrients to guarantee sound fetal growth. Not only are energy and protein requirements met, but minerals are furnished in appropriate amounts. Due to skeleton building and the synthesis of other tissues, calcium and phosphorus are necessary in significant amounts. Trace mineral supplementation is important during gestation as well because

the fetus stores in its liver the necessary iron, copper, and manganese to meet its requirements during the first few months of life. Interestingly, evolution has made this hoarding of trace minerals essential as mare's milk is quite low in these nutrients. A well-fortified feed designed specifically for broodmares in late pregnancy and lactation will contain ample energy, protein, minerals, and vitamins to maximize fetal maturation and milk production.

A note about feeding concentrates: Read the feeding instructions carefully and supply the mare with the amount indicated. If the mare begins to gain weight on the recommended amount of grain during late pregnancy (and you wish her weight to remain steady), she should be switched to a feed that is more concentrated in protein and minerals so less can be fed per day. ☺☺



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