

Don't wait until spring.....tailor your mare's nutrition now for a sound, healthy foal

Dr Clarissa Brown-Douglas, Kentucky Equine Research

It's hard to imagine (as we are cooped up in the depths of winter) that before we know it, the sun will be shining and our foal we've been waiting for will be here! Your prized performance mare has retired, you've selected the best stallion, she's been successfully bred, and now the waiting game is on. It's easy to think that most of the hard work has been done, however a healthy mare and foal doesn't happen by chance. Now is the time to ensure they're getting some vital nutritional care so that the foal can be given the best chance to grow sound and strong.

Pregnant mares

Your newly-pregnant mare doesn't have a huge change in her nutrient requirements because the growing foal is incredibly tiny. Provided her diet is nutritionally balanced and she is maintaining her body weight, you can keep her on her usual diet. It is a mistake to start 'feeding for two' as soon as she's in foal – this will likely result in a fat mare and associated health issues. Often newly pregnant mares on good pasture and hay can manage very well on a low intake vitamin and mineral supplement such as Barastoc Stud Balancer.

Pregnant mares have increased energy (calorie) needs from about six months of gestation through to birth. Mares will usually gain 12-15% of their body weight during pregnancy, most of which will occur in late gestation (nine to eleven months). By the last month of pregnancy, an average mare will consume roughly 20-22% more calories over maintenance needs.

Mares that are too thin throughout pregnancy may have a prolonged gestation period and have depleted nutrient stores. For mares that require the extra calories, a higher intake breeding feed such as Barastoc Breed N Grow should be fed along with high quality roughage. Thinner mares would benefit from the addition of highly digestible fibre sources such as Fibre Beet or Speedi Beet.

Protein and mineral requirements increase in late pregnancy. This is because the tissue of the foal that is growing during this time is quite high in protein, calcium and phosphorus. Trace mineral supplementation is also very important during this period because this is the key period in which the foal stores iron, zinc, copper, and manganese in its liver for use during the first few months after it is born. The foal has developed this nutritional strategy of storing trace minerals during pregnancy because mare's milk is quite low in these elements. Mares in late pregnancy are often overfed energy in an attempt to supply adequate protein and minerals to the developing foal. If the pregnant mare becomes fat during late pregnancy, she should be switched to a feed that is more concentrated in protein and minerals so that less can be fed per day (Barastoc Stud Balancer is recommended). This will restrict her energy intake while ensuring that she receives adequate quantities of other key nutrients.

Over the years nutrition researchers have identified a few key nutrients which should be considered with feeding your pregnant mare, one of which is natural vitamin E. Mares supplemented with natural vitamin E prior to foaling had boosted levels of infection-fighting proteins called immunoglobulins. Natural vitamin E is 5 times more bioavailable than synthetic forms of E, so make sure you read the label on the feed bag! Natural E is d-alpha tocopherol, synthetic is dl-alpha tocopherol. It goes without saying that all Barastoc breeding feeds contain Natural Vitamin E, making Barastoc Breed N Grow the perfect choice for your broodmares.

As with all class of horse, pregnant mares are not immune to gastric disturbance. However, as many of the common gastric ulcer medications are not fully evaluated for pregnancy, prevention is better than cure. These measures include access to plenty of forage, minimising environmental stress, and avoiding high-starch and high-sugar feed. Use of a research-proven digestive supplement as part of an overall management program can support both foregut and hindgut health. One such supplement is the prebiotic Diamond V XPC. Research proven to support gut health, boosting digestion and improving immunity – Barastoc Breeding feeds are fortified with Diamond V XPC.

Mares with foal at foot

Once your foal is on the ground, the well-fed mare will provide them with all vital nutrition through their milk. Mare's feed requirements will increase significantly during lactation, often requiring 3 times as much feed than in early pregnancy. Feeding high quality forage and a full breeding feed is a good idea during this important phase, unless the mare is a good-doer in which case a balancer should meet requirements without the calories.

Foals will nurse very frequently in the early weeks and begin to nibble on grass and their mother's feed within a few weeks. The difference between what the foal needs and what the mare's milk provides will occur around 3 months of age, so at this stage it is a good idea to introduce the foal's own feed. Depending on the body condition of the foal and the grass available, this could be as little as a small amount of a balancer pellet, such as Barastoc Stud Balancer, or a small meal of a full breeding feed such as Breed N Grow.

Weanlings

After weaning, it is common practice to turn foals out for a length of time to grow on and mature. Please don't forget about their nutrition during this time – the period between weaning and 12-18 months is a really significant window for the onset of several developmental diseases affecting bone and joint development, which can go on and hinder their future soundness. Nutrition, especially deficiencies and imbalances, have a role to play in the onset of these diseases. Weanlings, even when turned out, still need a balanced feed or supplement on a daily basis to give them the best possible chance of growing strong, sound bones and joints.

A feed in the Barastoc stable which is ideal for paddock feeding is Low GI Cube – the larger style cube is easily picked up from the ground by the young horse, and its formulation provides all the important protein, vitamins and minerals for the growing horse in a safe, high-fibre, and tasty cube. Low GI Cube is ideal for weanlings as research has shown that feeds with lower glycaemic energy sources, such as the digestible fibre found in Low GI may be beneficial in preventing the onset of osteochondrosis, one of the more debilitating developmental cartilage diseases. Low GI cube also has the added advantage of containing an ingredient called BMC which is research-proven to increase bone mineral content in weanlings.

It's important that weanlings are not allowed to get too fat, which can easily happen especially if turned out on good pasture. In these cases, it is a good idea to monitor their body condition regularly to ensure you can see the last rib. If they are getting too porky, you can meet nutrition requirements by feeding Barastoc Stud balancer.

Yearlings and beyond

The goal during the period from 12 months of age is to still provide a balanced diet while monitoring body condition. High quality fibre, balanced protein, vitamins and minerals are still key to ensure these young bodies are given the best chance for optimal growth and development. Breeding feeds such as Barastoc Breed N Grow, Barastoc Low GI Cube, or Barastoc Stud balancer are suitable and recommended for all young stock up until about 3-4 years of age, by which they can safely transition onto a feed more suited to their profession.

In summary, targeting nutrition of the mare in the winter months can lead to a successful breeding season. Nutrition can play a significant role in the health and productivity of both mares and their offspring.

Barastoc has a wide range of feeds which have been scientifically designed to provide the best nutrition to your mare, whether dry, pregnant or lactating, as well as your growing foal and young athlete. We offer higher calorie feeds for those poor doers (Barastoc Breed N Grow, Barastoc Low GI Cube), high quality fibre sources for when pasture is limited (Fibre Beet), and low intake perfectly balanced supplements for the good-doers who don't need the calories (Barastoc Stud Balancer). As with all horses, it is highly recommended to seek the guidance of a qualified equine nutritionist to tailor a balanced diet for your horse's individual needs.