ASK the Experts

Getting Ready For Spring
Preparing Pasture For Your Broodmare

Q: ***Why is tall fescue pasture bad for my broodmare?***

A: Tall fescue is a species of grass that is used in pastures because of its ability to withstand the grazing pressures of livestock. Some tall fescue varieties have an endophytic fungus invisible to the human eye that produces toxins. If the toxins are ingested, they can cause reproductive problems in your broodmare that can ultimately lead to the death of your mare, foal, or both. One action of the toxins is to interfere with normal dopamine secretion in the brain, which prevents the broodmare from producing milk prior to foaling. This is a bad situation because the newborn foal needs to drink colostrum to ingest important antibodies immediately following birth to help it fight infection during the early months of its life. Another problem associated with mares ingesting endophyte-infected tall fescue is a prolonged gestation period. The longer gestational period allows the foal and the placenta to grow larger in the mare, contributing to a difficult birth known as dystocia, which makes an unassisted foaling difficult for the mare. When the placenta grows, it gets thicker and heavier, which can cause it to separate from the uterus, cutting off the foal's oxygen supply, leading to suffocation. Also a heavier placenta may be retained in the mare after foaling, which may cause toxemia in the mare.

There are precautions that every horse breeder should take at least 6 months prior to the mare's expected foaling date. First, breeders should examine their pastures for tall fescue and if present, have it tested for the fungus. Maryland Cooperative Extension agricultural educators in the counties can help with this process. If endophyte-infected tall fescue is present in the broodmare's pasture, eliminate the broodmare's exposure to it at least 60–90 days prior to foaling. Ways this can be accomplished are to move broodmares to pastures free of tall fescue or feed hay not containing tall fescue on a dry lot. Serious horse breeders should reestablish pastures without infected tall fescue. There are endophyte free and safer endophyte varieties of tall fescue not associated with causing reproductive problems available on the market. If the broodmare has been exposed to endophyte-infected tall fescue and is past her foaling date, tall fescue should be removed from her diet and the vet should be contacted immediately. A drug called domperidone will most likely be given by the veterinarian to initiate milk production. Parturition may need to be initiated depending on how many days the broodmare is overdue.

Prevention is the best key to avoiding tall fescue toxicosis in broodmare. For more information, call your local county MCE agricultural educator or your veterinarian.

Got a Question? Get an Answer! *Equiery* readers can ask questions about their horses or horse farms and a panel of experts with the University of Maryland and Cooperative Extension Services will answer them. **If you would like the panel to answer your question directly, you must e-mail it to Dr. Amy Ordakowski Burk** at **ao38@umail.umd.edu** or **Erin Petersen** at **ep88@umail.umd.edu** or, you can fax your question to 410-489-7828 or mail it in to P.O. Box 610, Lisbon, MD 21765, and the questions will be forwarded to the panel, but only e-mailed questions will be answered directly. Written questions only will be accepted, and select questions may be used for publication in an upcoming *Equiery*.