Managing Moody Performance Mares

The Educated Horseman: Health Series

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Behavioral problems, temperament changes, lack of focus and pain are just a few of the symptoms horse owners have reported while their mares are in heat. These changes are so common most people believe reduced performance issues in mares are caused by hormonal changes. Unfortunately, this belief has caused many horse owners to place higher emphasis on gender and discount more important performance factors.

Mares are seasonally polyestrous, meaning they are able to have multiple estrous cycles throughout the spring and summer, and exhibit behavioral estrus or "heat" five to seven days out of a 21 day cycle. During a normal cycle, mares may display the following symptoms due to an increase in estrogen:

- Excessive urination,
- Winking,
- Squealing,
- Tail Swishing,
- Attitude Changes,
- Kicking, and
- Colic (associated with the pain caused by ovulation).

While each mare is unique and will display different behavioral changes it is important to recognize normal behavior during the estrous cycle to manage the symptoms appropriately. Additional examinations, such as ultrasonography, may be required to accurately determine estrous in the mare that has silent or covert estrous cycles. A veterinarian also should do a thorough physical exam to rule out any medical problems not related to the estrous cycle. Once it is concluded the behavioral change is related to hormonal fluctuations during estrus, multiple treatment options are available.

Research has shown that there are safe, effective methods to control estrus.

- **Hormone administration** – Progesterone is the hormone responsible for suppressing estrus. The most commonly administered progesterone form is altrenogest or Regu-Mate. This supplement is given once daily by mouth at a dose of 1 mL per 110 lbs of body weight and will typically suppress estrus in mares 2-3 days after beginning the treatment. To maximize the effectiveness of this supplement, treatment should begin 3-4 days prior to an event and continued to ensure estrus suppression. *NOTE* Females must be careful when administering Regu-Mate as it can disrupt their menstrual cycle, prolong pregnancy, or cause miscarriage.
- **GnRH Therapies** –Another method to control reproductive function in mares is through the use of Gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) therapies. Ovarian activity is regulated by the pulsatile release of GnRH. Immunization of mares with a GnRH vaccine results in a decrease in ovarian activity, fertility and estrous behavior for 25-30 weeks. Vaccination of mares against GnRH is an effective, safe and reversible method to control estrus. However, the duration of estrus suppression is not as predictable as daily hormone administration.
- **Implants** – Intra-uterine devices can be used to prolong the luteal phase and prevent estrus for variable lengths of time. The use of a 35mm sterilized glass marble will cause the suppression of estrus in mares. This treatment causes a sustained level of progesterone. Although no damage was

caused by the use of this treatment and mares were able to return to normal after removal, research has shown varied success with this treatment and; therefore, is usually not very reliable.

- **Ovariectomy** – is the removal of the mare's ovaries and is considered the last resort for estrus suppression in mares. Unlike the previously mentioned treatments, this procedure is permanent and will result in the loss of any future offspring. This procedure will be effective in reducing behavioral issues only if they are related to hormone fluctuations.

While mares do experience behavioral changes more frequently than geldings do, it is important to recognize the cause of the unwanted behavior. If the change is because of hormone fluctuations, multiple management techniques are available to mitigate the overall effects of estrus on performance. Taking advantage of the available treatments may assist your "moody" mare in improving her overall performance and demeanor. Anyone interested in any of the available treatments can contact their local veterinarian.

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Author
Neely Walker, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor (Equine Specialist)
School of Animal Sciences

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William B. Richardson, LSU Vice President for Agriculture
Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service
LSU College of Agriculture

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