

My Mare's in Heat: Predicting and Recognizing Signs of Estrus

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Your mare is stopping to pee every 10 yards. She is swishing her tail and all together not paying much attention to what you are asking her to do. Not only can this cause you problems in the show ring, it can be annoying and frustrating in any situation—whether out on the trail or practicing for your next event. So what can you do about it? Why is it happening, and can it be predicted?

What is “heat?”

You have heard the term frequently that a mare is in heat, but what does it mean exactly? Heat is the layman's term for showing signs of estrus. Whether you are planning to breed your mare or not, her body will continue to prepare to be pregnant. Horses are polyestrous seasonal breeders, which means that they will have multiple estrous cycles during the horse's natural breeding season. With normal gestation lasting 11 months and the natural desire to have young born in the spring to avoid tough winters with newborns, most mares will begin cycling in mid spring. If the mare is not bred during this time period, she will enter a period of anestrus in late summer or early fall and will stop cycling altogether.

The length of daylight, not the temperature, determines the point at which a mare comes out of anestrus. As the amount of daylight begins to increase in the spring, the mare's pineal gland activates to block the release of the hormone melatonin. A decrease in melatonin will trigger the release of gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) from the hypothalamus. The GnRH then acts on the pituitary gland to encourage the release of both follicle-stimulating hormone and luteinizing hormone. These two hormones tell the mare's ovaries to begin preparing an oocyte for ovulation. As the ovary matures the oocyte, a fluid filled follicle begins to grow around the oocyte. As the follicle grows it produces estrogen, which tells the mare's brain that she needs to be bred in the next few days. This causes the behavioral changes and outward indications that we call “being in heat.”

What are symptoms of being in heat?

Mare cycles generally last 21 days with them expressing signs of heat for 4-7 days. Estrus is expressed outwardly by; raising the tail, frequent urination, “winking” or eversion of the vulva, squealing, and posturing which entails widening the back legs while rounding the hind quarters. Behaviorally the mare will be receptive to stallions and may attempt to get closer to stallions and even geldings if the situation presents itself.

Mares will vary in the magnitude in which they express estrus. Some will even express a silent heat, where they will show no outward signs of estrus even though they are cycling normally. Occasionally mares may show signs to a degree that can make

them difficult to control. Any variation on this spectrum is possible.

How can it be managed or controlled?

Most of the time a mare showing estrus will not have a significant impact on her performance. However, on occasion it may present a problem. Understanding equine estrous cycles and keeping track of your own mares trends can help avoid potential problems. Simply keeping them away from stallions and sometimes geldings will often suppress the behavior. If trail riding, staying to the back of the group will often lessen the issues you may encounter.

If simple management practices are not sufficient in controlling disruptive estrous behavior, other options exist upon consultation with a veterinarian. Progesterone supplementation is a common method for suppressing cyclicity in mares that are frequently showing or racing. Progesterone is the hormone that maintains pregnancy. Therefore, when given to a non-pregnant mare the hormone will inhibit the mare from retuning into heat. This option has little side effects to the mare, and is relatively easy to administer; however it can cause issues with humans if it comes in contact with skin. This can also be an expensive option.

Ovariectomy, or removal of the ovaries, is an extreme option that is not frequently used for the sole purpose of suppressing estrous behavior, but can be used if other complications exist.

When could it mean something else?

For the majority of mares, estrus is a benign, yet sometimes annoying regular occurrence in the life of the animal. However, some signs should not be ignored. If you are having problems with your mare and think it might be estrus related try keeping a detailed daily record of behaviors both positive and negative. Try to find patterns. If you have access to a stallion or gelding that has stud like tendencies, try teasing your mare. You may find out that there is an underlying issue unrelated to estrus.

Some mares will exhibit a submissive behavior when encountering a perceived threat, which can involve leaning away, squirting urine and swishing her tail. This behavior is easily confused with estrus, but in actuality has little to do with hormones. Time away from the perceived stressor and gentle training can sometimes be all that is needed in these situations.

It is also important to know that where urination during estrus may appear thicker than normal, mucus is not part of being in heat. If you see a mucus coming from the vulva of your mare this can be a sign of a uterine infection and will need medical treatment. Other problems of such as vaginal, urinary, or bladder conditions can also present symptoms that may

mimic estrus. This is why knowing your mare's tendencies is always important so that you can tell if something is out of the ordinary. Many times, kicking at the abdomen or other colic-like symptoms is this distinguishing factor between estrus and a health complication.

It can also be a cause of concern if your mare begins to take on stallion-like behaviors. In mild forms, this can also be mistaken for estrus behavior. Being aggressive towards other horses, biting and striking, attempting to mount other mares, can all fit into this category. This usually indicates high levels of steroid hormones. This can occasionally come from supplements or

medications, but also can be caused by a tumor creating an overproduction of the hormones. Seek veterinary care if you notice this behavior in your mare.

Conclusion

Mares displaying estrous behavior can be frustrating, but is typically nothing to worry about and will subside in a few days. However, it is important to understand mare estrous cycles as well as what is typical for your mare as to not overlook more serious complications that could be somewhat disguised as estrus behavior.