

NEWS ARTICLE for Sunday, January 26, 2003

Fescue Toxicosis in Broodmares

by

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Tall Fescue is a hardy grass that is easily established, tolerates close grazing, stands up to heavy horse traffic, and survives drought conditions that withers other grasses. Fescue is resistant to insects, disease and weed competition. It has a long growing season starting early in the spring and lasting until late in the fall.

If you have an old established pasture you probably have Fescue. You also probably have an endophyte infection in your stand of tall Fescue. Will this endophyte infection harm your horses? It is difficult to predict, but the more you know about tall fescue the better you will be able to avoid its potential devastating effects on broodmares and newborn foals.

Documented cases of fescue related toxicity have included some of the following common problems:

- Abortions may occur around the time the mare would be expected to foal. Mares may carry foals for 30 to 40 days longer than normal. During the **prolonged gestation** the foals continue to grow and the birth is often difficult because of the size of the foal.
- **Thickened placentas** are often seen in mares grazing fescue. Mares may **retain the placenta** longer than normal leading to infection, **laminitis (founder) and difficult rebreeding**.
- The most common problem of mares on fescue is that they **produce little or no milk (agalactia)** and the production of **colostrum can be decreased**.

The toxic agent in fescue is associated with an endophyte fungus. The fungus lives between the plant cells and either produces a chemical or causes the fescue to produce a chemical which scientists believe to be an alkaloid toxin. Exactly what triggers the production of this toxin has not been determined, however, they do know that the fungus is seed borne and cannot be spread any other way. They also know that most fescue pastures are infected with the endophyte to varying degrees. Typically infections may range from 10 to 100%. Problems have been reported on farms with infections across the entire range. Cutting the grass for hay does not destroy the endophyte or reduce the alkaloid content or effect. The fungus lives within the plant and cannot be detected visually, however, you can test fescue for the level of endophyte infection.

There are no easy solutions to the fescue problem for broodmare owners. Current practices for dealing with the problem include removing the mares from fescue fields during the last 60-90 days of pregnancy. For mares foaling during the winter months, this practice is fairly simple. Past April, mares should be fed a legume hay or some other grass hay and grain on a dry lot or a paddock planted in an alternate cool season grass. This is also the time when the mare will require a slightly higher nutritional level.