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The Grass is Always Greener...

Every year, we here in North Texas see at least 2-3 cases of Fescue Toxicity. This is especially true as spring starts to arrive, and the grass starts turning green. Fescue is one of the first green grasses that grows in the spring, so naturally, horses start gravitating towards it. This is especially problematic as our mares get closer to foaling, as foaling season comes at the same time the fescue starts to grow.



In horses, the grass itself is not the problem (though it can be in sheep and cattle). The problem is that almost all fescue is infested with an endophyte (a type of fungus) called *Acremonium coenophialum*. This fungus grows in between the plant cells, and is



especially proliferative when the plant is producing flowers and seed heads in the spring. Endophytes produce a toxin called ergopeptine, which can restrict blood flow to the extremities. As you can imagine, this is not good for the growing foal.

In broodmares grazing on endophyte infested fescue, they will oftentimes have a longer gestation time, a thickened placenta, and may retain their placenta after giving birth. Sometimes they will even abort the fetus. The biggest problem in mares is that they usually haveagalactia, which means they will produce little to no milk as the hormone for producing milk is inhibited by the toxin. If they do have milk, it's usually not rich in colostrum as is needed for the newborn foal, and it has very little calcium because it's bound up by the ergopeptine toxin.

Foals born to mares are often not correctly matured. They will often have very lax tendons, a thickened umbilical stump, and they may not even be able to suckle properly. Getting these foals to stand and nurse can be nearly impossible and requires weeks of intensive care. Because the mare is not producing milk, they are especially prone to failure of passive transfer (no colostrum) and starvation. Since some mares have prolonged gestation times, these foals continue to grow and can actually get stuck in the birth canal as well.

If you suspect you have endophyte infected fescue, there are several things you can do to protect your mare and foal. The first and best thing to do would be to get your pregnant mares off the grass as soon as the grass starts turning green here in North Texas (February or March depending on the year). Either dry lot them, or put them in a pasture that does NOT contain fescue. Two weeks before foaling and up to 5 days after foaling, mares can be given a drug called domperidone to encourage milk production. There are several other drugs that can be used to help mares that have been grazing on fescue, but these are the two best solutions.