

September 2021 Newsletter

Managing hormones

Both male and female horses are by default “entire” and this can make life more difficult. In this newsletter we will discuss not just castrating colts and rigs but also different ways to manage those “moody mares”.

What are the benefits of castrating a colt?

It enables them to live a more sociable life, enabling turn out with either other geldings or mares. It also helps them concentrate on being worked, making them easier on the ground and under saddle. It also makes it easier to find stabling at a livery yard for them and reduces the risk of unwanted pregnancies if the colt escapes.

Can horses be castrated standing?

We commonly castrate horses standing, under sedation with the use of local and then leave their wounds open to drain. However if your horse is very small we may need to give them a small field general anaesthetic to enable us to access their testicles. If your horse has a retained testicle, is very well endowed or is older than 3 years old we will most likely need to have them into the practice to have a general anaesthetic to remove them safely.

If you are curious as to how we castrate please take a look at our Youtube page, and go to our playlist, where in association with Little Green Stables we have a video of the lovely Rum being castrated.

What are the differences for donkeys?

Donkeys have a larger blood supply to their testicles so it is recommended that they are castrated under general anaesthetic and the incisions closed.

Are there any non surgical ways of castrating a stallion?

You can inject a stallion or colt with Improvac (a GnRH-vaccine, hormone vaccine). This vaccine isn't licensed in horses but can be effective at reducing stallion behaviours. It can have a long term impact on fertility so shouldn't be used in any colts or stallions that may want to be used for breeding at a later date. But it is not as effective as castrating and can have quite variable results. To use effectively two vaccines should be given a month apart with 6 monthly boosters. This vaccine is generally used to control wild horse populations or can be used to shrink the size of testicles prior to castration in older horses.

Oral regumate can also be used to suppress stallion behaviour however this needs to be given daily. If used in young colts there is also a risk of a long term impact on the colt's fertility so should be avoided in young animals intended for breeding. In mature stallions most seem to return to normal sexual function 4-5 months post finishing a course of regumate.

Please note regumate should be handled with gloves and should not be handled by women who are trying to conceive or who are pregnant.

summerleaze@summerleaze-vets.co.uk 01297 304 007



How old does a colt have to be to be castrated?

We can castrate them from about 6 months old if they have two testicles present. Commonly we castrate horses as yearlings, before stallion behaviour becomes learnt behaviour and when they have two testicles present.

What time of the year should I castrate my colt?

We tend to castrate in the spring and the autumn, to try to avoid when the ground is too muddy to turn the horse out and to try to avoid the flies. However both these risks can be managed so we are happy to castrate at any time of the year.

What do I do if I suspect my gelding is a rig?

Rigs are horses that appear to be castrated but actually have one or two retained testicles. We can test if a horse is a rig by performing a blood test to check if their hormone levels indicate there is testicular tissue still present. If this is the case the horse will need to undergo a general anaesthetic to remove the remaining testicle. An ultrasound may also be recommended prior to this to try to locate the testicle.

What can I do to manage my mare's hormones?

Regumate is commonly used to manage mares who have excessive oestrus behaviour (aka those typical moody mares). This has to be given oral daily. In theory this should not impact the mare's breeding prospects in the future and is a commonly used drug to manipulate when a mare is cycling to enable a mare to be covered or be inseminated. It is important that a mare is ultrasounded prior to starting on regumate to ensure there isn't a tumour causing the excessive hormonal behaviour.

We can also use the Improvac vaccine in mares (off license). This can impact a mare's fertility long term so it is important before the mare is injected to decide if you may wish to breed from her long term. It is also advised before starting Improvac to rule out any ovarian tumours by ultrasound.

You can also remove a mare's ovaries however this is not a common procedure and generally only advised if there are ovarian tumours present. The procedure can be done standing endoscopically but requires significant box rest following surgery. Due to the invasive nature of the procedure it is not to be undertaken lightly.

Traditionally mares who were very hormonal were bred from. Whilst pregnant their behaviour may change significantly but there is no guarantee that their behaviour will improve having had a foal.

Another less medical option is to keep your mare on a yard away from geldings, colts or stallions. Single sex herds can be an easy solution for managing some hormonal mares.

What would you do if you suspected an ovarian tumour?

We can ultrasound mares to identify if there are any abnormal structures on their ovaries. We can also take bloods to identify the mare's hormone levels to identify if the abnormal findings do relate to a tumour and what type it is. Some tumours require surgical removal.

Please contact us on 01297304007 if you have any worries about your equine or wish to discuss any of the medications or surgical interventions discussed.

