

# Ask A Vet: Placentitis

*Sunday, March 9, 2014*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Last spring my broodmare "bagged up" really early and then aborted a couple of weeks later. What can I do differently this year?

Dear Reader,

When a pregnant mare develops an udder (with or without milk production) greater than two to four weeks before giving birth, we call that premature lactation. It is not a welcome symptom when the mare is so close to the big event. Many times this development is associated with an impending abortion. Most mares will start bagging up about two to four weeks before birth. The biggest increase in mammary size happens in the last two weeks, typically. Each mare can behave a little differently, but each tends to stay true to her previous history. If a mare starts developing an udder around three weeks before, she generally follows that pattern year after year.

The two most common causes of premature lactation are twin pregnancies and bacterial placentitis (an infection of the placenta). Twins in mares are an undesirable outcome to breeding mares. Only 13% of twin pregnancies make it to full term and result in one or more live foals. Once a twin pregnancy has reached late term, our options are very limited. This underscores the importance of having an ultrasound done early in gestation, 14-20 days after the last breeding, by a qualified veterinarian who can intervene. It is much easier to eliminate one of the twins at that time.

Placental infection accounts for approximately 30% of late term abortions. The majority of these are caused by bacteria which ascend through the cervix from the vaginal canal. Once through the cervix, the infective organisms invade the space between the uterine wall and the placenta. This separates the two structures and stops the flow of nutrients from mother to baby in that area of the placenta. If enough surface area of contact is lost, the foal becomes distressed. The infection also causes an inflammatory reaction which stimulates uterine contractions, thus inducing premature delivery. The most common symptoms or clinical signs of placentitis include premature lactation and vaginal discharge. While the degree of mammary development and amount of discharge can vary, all mares that exhibit such symptoms should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible. With appropriate diagnosis and treatment, 84% of treated mares can carry their foal to term. If you have a mare with a history of previous late term abortion, an ultrasound or series of ultrasounds in the last three months of gestation would be a good idea to evaluate the placenta/uterine unit for signs of infection.

The birth of a new foal is a long awaited event. Most prospective mothers have no trouble throughout their pregnancies and deliver foals with little fuss. However, close monitoring after the eighth month for early onset of mammary development and /or vaginal discharge is advised. Prompt care by your veterinarian will help ensure a successful new birth.

-Dr. Wade Hammond