

C-Section In Mares



Horse Care

by HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Sometimes it is impossible for a mare to deliver her foal normally, and it must be removed surgically. Juan Samper, DVM, PhD (Langley, British Columbia) says there are several reasons that a C-section may be needed. These would generally fall into three categories—a programmed C-section, an emergency C-section and a terminal C-section.

“There may be a pre-existing condition in the mare that makes it impossible for her to deliver vaginally, or would put the health of the mare at risk to deliver the foal. If a mare has a fractured pelvis, for instance (that compromises the dimensions of the birth canal, even though the fracture healed), or if you have a mare with a history of problems foaling or problems with her reproductive tract in general (such as cervix incompatible with vaginal delivery, etc.), you’ll need a C-section,” he says. In those mares you must carefully time the surgery and do it when the mare is ready to foal. Taking the foal too early will generally result in the loss of the foal.

“Another situation is an emergency C-section in a mare who is in labor with a foal who’s not in proper posture. Either the veterinarian cannot get there to correct the dystocia or the veterinarian or farm manager are unable to correct the posture and position of the foal in order to deliver it vaginally.” This puts you into an extreme time crunch because the surgery must be done immediately.

“Most of the time in these instances, it will be too late to have a live foal but the surgery is important to save the mare and must be timely in order to save her,” he says. It is preferable to bring the mare to a veterinary hospital to do the surgery, under ideal hospital conditions, but sometimes this is not possible, especially if the mare is unable to travel.

“I had one mare last year who started to foal and everything was normal except that the foal was coming backward. We were not able to pull the foal and deliver it vaginally. At that point, with the foal partway out, what are you going to do? You cannot get the mare up and transport her to hospital. I ended up doing a flank C-section, in the stall. The foal was dead, but the mare survived. If you have to do it on the spot, you must do the most appropriate and safest thing—for both the mare and the people involved in the procedure—and this would be a flank incision,” he says. Normally the surgery would be a midline incision with the mare on her back.

“You have to be prepared. When someone is foaling out a number of mares, that person needs to be prepared to make a decision about what must be done (if a mare has an

emergency dystocia), and how it needs to be done,” says Samper. There is no time for indecision.

“The other possibility that has to be considered, in the various reasons for surgery, is a terminal C-section. This would be when the foal is more valuable than the mare, and the object is to save the baby’s life.” This might be the case in an embryo-transfer situation in which a recipient mare is carrying another mare’s foal. If the mare carrying the foal has a serious problem, there may be need for a terminal C-section.

“In this instance, you would anesthetize the mare, open her up and remove the baby, and then euthanize the mare. This would usually be done if the mare has started to foal and cannot deliver the foal,” he explains.

One of the things a person needs to keep in mind is that you cannot be caught off guard. “If you are foaling mares, you need to know what steps you will take. How far away is your veterinarian? Where is the closest place you can take the mare if she had to have surgery? How do you know when the mare is in trouble and how long do you wait before you call for help? You need a plan,” says Samper.

Monitor The Mare

If you have a mare whom you know will need a surgical delivery, such as a mare with a pre-existing condition who would require a C-section, it is crucial to know exactly when she is ready to foal. “You must have several things in place, starting with an accurate breeding date. Then you need to know how ready she is to foal, and this can be done by checking the calcium levels in the milk,” he says.

When she is getting close, then you can either watch her continually for when she goes into labor, or induce her. In these situations you would want the mare to be at the veterinary hospital when she goes into labor. “Once she actually starts, then you can go ahead and anesthetize the mare and take the foal out,” says Samper.

You can’t just take the foal whenever you think it is full term; the mare’s body must be programmed for delivery, in order to have optimum chance for a live, healthy foal, which means she must be in labor when the surgery is performed. “You cannot go in and take the baby out just because you decide it’s time. The mare and the baby both have to be ready, in order for us to deliver a healthy foal,” he explains.

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Horse Care Cont'd.

Some people think that if a pregnant mare becomes seriously injured or is dying, they could have a C-section performed and save the foal. If the foal is not ready—if the mare is not actually in labor when you take the foal out—you would rarely end up with a live foal. Even if the mare is near term and has a serious colic that requires surgery, if she is not ready to deliver the foal, you are better off to just do the colic surgery and leave the foal in there.

“A person could argue that this would be a pre-existing condition that could necessitate C-section—if the mare is in a serious state of disease (such as endotoxemia or peritonitis) or has a problem such as colic or some other medical condition that is not associated with the reproductive tract or the vaginal tract for delivery. Some people wonder if it is better to take the risk of removing the baby even if it's a little premature. If you are going to lose the mare anyway and she is more than 300 days' gestation, you may decide to take the risk and go to the effort and expense of trying to save the foal,” he says, but it's not always easy to save it. Intensive care units for neonates have improved a lot in the past decade, and there may be a chance of saving the foal, but it's still a huge risk and can be very expensive. It's best to wait as long as possible, unless the mare is actually dying.

Have A Plan

“The owners of mares who come to my clinic to foal are informed of all the possible problems that might occur, and need to decide ahead of time what they would want done with the mare. Do they want me to deal with it and see how much I can get done in trying to deliver the foal, or do they want me to refer the mare to a surgical hospital?” he says.

In some instances, an owner might choose a fetotomy if the foal is already dead by the time the realization is made that the mare cannot deliver normally. It may be cheaper to do a fetotomy (cutting off a limb or leg so the foal's body can be delivered vaginally), but it is not always safer than a C-section. “A fetotomy is a procedure that requires a lot of skill and luck to save the mare,” says Samper. Many times it will result in a mare with a torn cervix or damaged uterus. The veterinarian must be very good at this, to avoid severe injury to the mare.

Everyone should be prepared for all possibilities. “A mare's foaling is such an explosive event that it doesn't give you time to call around and try to decide what to do if there is a problem. Most of the time it will happen in the middle of the night. You need to be ready for whatever eventuality you may encounter. Having the right people available at the right time is going to be the key. This gives a much better chance for having a successful outcome,” he says.

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“You also need to know ahead of time what a successful outcome entails. Is it to have a live mare? Or baby? Or both? You need to already have your priorities established for what is more important, in this situation.”

After The Surgery

“In general, a mare after the surgery would be cared for about the same as mare that had a normal delivery. The biggest thing, following the surgery, is that you want to make sure the placenta is not compromised. When you suture the uterus up, you want to make sure that part of the placenta is not caught in the stitches. Shedding the placenta is one of the key factors in the recovery/health of the mare following the surgery. After that, within a day or two of the C-section, you can start doing uterine lavage without any major risk to the mare,” says Samper.

The mare should be on systemic antibiotics for a few days,

and you should also use some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for a while. “She needs to be treated medically and have all the supportive care she needs. Sometimes these mares are a little bit shocky when they go into labor and not able to deliver, and will need some intravenous fluids for a few days,” he says. The mare has a double stress—with a compromised foaling, and then the surgery on top of that.

If the mare recovers from the surgery, she has a good chance for normal breed-back. “As long as there is no serious damage to the reproductive tract, the chances for a mare to breed back are very good, not much different than with a regular foaling. And the chances of a mare repeating the need for surgical delivery are very low, unless it is a mare with a pre-existing condition that precludes normal delivery. The chances of a mare having a problem again are very, very low,” he explains. 🐾

The Cost Of A C-Section

“The surgery in general will cost about \$3,000. But this may be just the starting point if there are complications following the surgery. If the mare ends up with peritonitis there will be additional expense to treat her for that. This may depend on whether it was a really clean surgery in which there was no contamination—no one had been trying to deliver the foal beforehand,” explains Samper.

If it was a dirty C-section, meaning there were several people trying to deliver the foal and there’s contamination from vaginal manipulation, lubricants, etc., then the mare may end up with peritonitis. Or she may have a torn uterus. These sorts of complications would entail more time in the hospital and more expense. If there’s a live foal who ends up in intensive care for a while, this would be an additional cost.



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