

# Decoding Your Mare's Cycle

*A Plain-English Guide to the Terms Every Mare Owner Hears During Breeding Season  
"Especially When it Starts to Feel Like We're All Speaking Greek"*

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**Quick note:** This article is meant to help mare owners feel more comfortable following the conversation during breeding season. It is not a substitute for a qualified reproductive veterinarian, but it will help the terminology make a lot more sense.

## Quick glossary: breeding terms mare owners hear all the time

- **Estrous cycle** — Your mare's full reproductive cycle, which averages about 21 days.
- **Estrus** — Also called heat. This is the part of the cycle when the mare is receptive to the stallion and getting close to ovulation.
- **Diestrus** — The phase after ovulation, when the mare is no longer in heat.
- **Transitional** — The time period when a mare is transitioning from her winter anestrus into her normal cycling season.
- **Follicle** — A fluid-filled structure on the ovary that contains the egg.
- **Dominant follicle** — The main follicle that is growing toward ovulation.
- **Ovulation** — When the follicle releases the egg.
- **Ultrasound** — The tool veterinarians use to look at the mare's ovaries and uterus so they can follow the cycle more accurately.
- **Uterine edema** — A normal fluid swelling pattern in the uterine lining that often shows the mare is in heat.
- **Uterine fluid** — Free fluid in the uterus, which is different from edema and can sometimes signal a problem.
- **Cervix** — The opening between the uterus and vagina that changes tone depending on where the mare is in her cycle.
- **Corpus luteum (CL)** — The structure left behind after ovulation that produces progesterone.
- **Progesterone** — The hormone that supports the mare after ovulation and helps maintain pregnancy.
- **Breeding window** — The period when timing is right to breed the mare or inseminate her with semen.
- **Preg check** — The first ultrasound pregnancy check, usually done around 14 to 16 days after ovulation.
- **Heartbeat check** — A follow-up ultrasound, often around day 24 to 25, when the embryo's heartbeat may be seen.
- **Follow-up pregnancy check** — Another check, often around day 30 to 35, to confirm the pregnancy is still progressing normally.

**Cycle snapshot:** Heat → Follicle grows → Edema rises → Ovulation → CL forms → Pregnancy check

## Understanding Your Mare's Cycle

One of the most helpful things a mare owner can do is learn the basic language of the breeding cycle.

You do not need to become a reproductive veterinarian, but you do need to understand enough to follow what your vet is seeing, why certain decisions are being made, and why timing matters so much. A lot of frustration in the breeding process comes from owners feeling like things are happening around them without really understanding what anyone is talking about. Once you understand the rhythm of the mare's cycle, the whole process starts to make more sense.

### What a normal breeding cycle looks like

A mare's estrous cycle averages about 21 days and is divided into two main phases: estrus and diestrus. Estrus is the heat cycle, the period when the mare is receptive to the stallion and approaching ovulation. Diestrus is the period after ovulation, when she is no longer in heat and the reproductive tract is under the influence of progesterone.

Most mares are in estrus for roughly 5 to 7 days, though that can vary, and ovulation usually occurs toward the end of that heat period. After she ovulates, she enters diestrus, which lasts about 14 to 15 days if she is not pregnant. Then, if she has not conceived, the cycle starts over again.

That is the broad overview, but when you are actually trying to get a mare in foal, those days matter a great deal. Breeding is not about just catching the mare in heat. It is about breeding her close enough to ovulation that healthy sperm and a healthy egg have the best chance of meeting at the right time.

### Culturing a mare

When your veterinarian says they need to culture your mare that means they will collect a sterile sample from the uterus to check for bacteria or, in some cases, other organisms that may be interfering with fertility. It is often done as part of a breeding soundness exam, especially in mares with a history of not settling, fluid in the uterus, poor vulvar or cervical conformation, or suspected endometritis. A culture can be very helpful, but it is only one piece of the puzzle — many veterinarians pair it with **cytology**, because bacteria alone does not always prove there is an active uterine infection. In plain English, culturing helps your vet determine whether the uterine environment is healthy enough for pregnancy or whether treatment may be needed before breeding.



### What's a follicle?

A follicle is a fluid-filled structure on the ovary that contains the egg. As the mare comes into heat, one follicle usually becomes dominant and grows larger as ovulation approaches. When people say a mare has a 35 millimeter follicle or a nice big follicle, that is what they are talking about. The follicle is the structure your veterinarian is watching because it tells them where she is in her cycle and how close she may be to ovulating.

This is why mare owners hear so much about follicle size. Follicle size is not the only thing your veterinarian uses, but it is one important piece of the puzzle. A growing follicle, especially when paired with other signs like uterine edema and a relaxed cervix, helps tell the veterinarian that the mare is in estrus and getting closer to the time when breeding makes sense.

## Why we ultrasound and follow follicles?

Ultrasound is one of the most important tools in breeding management because it lets the veterinarian see what the mare's ovaries and uterus are doing in real time. Without ultrasound, people are left guessing based on teasing behavior, outward signs of heat, and hope. While behavior can be helpful, it is not accurate enough by itself for efficient breeding management.

By following follicles on ultrasound, your vet can tell whether the mare is truly cycling, whether she is developing a dominant follicle, whether that follicle is growing appropriately, whether she has already ovulated, and whether anything abnormal is happening. Ultrasound also allows them to evaluate the uterus, look for edema, identify fluid, and assess whether the mare looks like she is in the right phase of her cycle to be bred.

This matters because breeding a mare based on guesswork can get expensive in a hurry. Ultrasound helps reduce that guesswork.

## Why teasing alone is not enough?

Teasing can be a useful tool, but it is only one piece of the picture. Some mares are dramatic and obvious when they are in heat. Others are quiet, inconsistent, or downright misleading. Some mares tease well and are not quite ready, while others show very little and still ovulate right on schedule.

That is why experienced veterinarians do not rely on teasing behavior alone when a breeding is on the line. Teasing can tell you that a mare may be cycling, but ultrasound is what tells you what her ovaries and uterus are actually doing. When money, timing, and shipped semen are involved, behavior alone is not enough information to make your most important decisions.

## What's uterine edema?

Uterine edema is the fluid swelling pattern seen in the uterine lining when a mare is in estrus. On ultrasound, a healthy estrus uterus often shows a distinct layered appearance, sometimes described as a wagon-wheel pattern. That edema is caused by estrogen and is one of the signs that the mare is preparing for ovulation.

Edema matters because it helps the veterinarian confirm that the mare is truly in heat and that her uterus is responding appropriately. It is not something mare owners need to memorize in a technical way, but it is useful to understand the general principle: good uterine edema is usually a sign the mare is in the right hormonal phase for breeding.

## Uterine edema vs uterine fluid

This is where mare owners can get tripped up, because edema and fluid are not the same thing. Edema is a normal patterned swelling within the uterine lining that often appears when the mare is in heat. Uterine fluid, on the other hand, is free fluid sitting in the uterus, and depending on the amount and timing, it can be a sign that the uterus is not clearing itself as it should.

In simple terms, edema is often a normal part of the mare getting ready to ovulate. Fluid may be something your veterinarian wants to watch more closely or treat. That distinction matters, because mare owners often hear the word fluid and assume anything fluid-related is normal when it may not be.



## How do you decide when to breed or order semen?

This is where follicle tracking, uterine edema, semen type, and logistics all come together.

If you are using cooled shipped semen, the goal is usually to have good-quality semen in the mare as close to ovulation as possible. Because cooled semen has a limited lifespan, timing matters a great deal. Your veterinarian is usually looking at several things at once: the size of the follicle, how that follicle has changed since the previous exam, the amount and character of uterine edema, the tone of the cervix and uterus, and the stallion's collection and shipping schedule.

This is why you may hear things like, "She's close, but not quite ready," or "Let's check her again tomorrow before ordering." To a mare owner, that can feel frustrating. To a reproduction vet, that is good management. They are trying to avoid wasting a shipment, missing ovulation, or breeding at a less-than-ideal time.

***It is important to note that Gypsy Vanner mares tend to grow larger follicles prior to ovulation versus lighter breeds. It's important to have that conversation with your veterinarian prior to the start of breeding season to make sure everyone is on the same page before ordering semen.***

## Why semen type changes the timing game?

Not all semen has the same lifespan or requires the same level of precision. Fresh semen is generally the most forgiving. Cooled shipped semen can work very well, but the window is tighter and shipping logistics matter. Frozen semen usually requires the most precise timing of all, because it does not survive as long in the mare once thawed.

That is why your veterinarian may sound more relaxed in one breeding situation and much more intense in another. They are not changing their standards. They are adjusting to the biology of the semen they are working with. The less forgiving the semen type, the more carefully they have to narrow the timing around ovulation.



## What's a CL?

After the mare ovulates, the follicle does not simply disappear and do nothing. The tissue left behind transforms into a corpus luteum, or CL. The CL is a progesterone-producing structure on the ovary, and progesterone is the hormone that supports the mare after ovulation and helps maintain early pregnancy.

When your veterinarian sees a CL, that usually tells them the mare has already ovulated and is now out of heat. A mare in diestrus often has a CL, little to no uterine edema, and a cervix that is more closed and toned.

This is one reason cycle timing matters so much. Once the mare has ovulated and formed a CL, the breeding window for that cycle has essentially passed. If the semen was not there at the right time, you may be waiting for the next cycle.

## What does a typical breeding cycle look like in real life?

In real life, a breeding cycle often looks something like this:

Your mare begins to show signs of heat, or your veterinarian starts monitoring her because it is breeding season and you are trying to catch the right cycle. On ultrasound, your vet sees that she is developing a follicle and her uterus is showing edema. They continue checking her to see whether the follicle is growing and whether the mare looks like she is approaching ovulation.

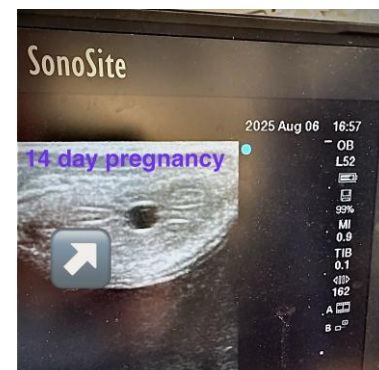
As she gets closer, the conversations become more specific. Is the follicle large enough? Is the edema appropriate? Is the cervix relaxing? Does the semen need to be ordered today for collection tomorrow? Is the stallion available? Are you using fresh, cooled, or frozen semen? Depending on the situation, the mare may be bred once or sometimes managed more intensively, especially with frozen semen, because the timing window is tighter.

Then she ovulates. After that, the follicle is gone, a CL begins to form, and the mare is no longer in her fertile heat period for that cycle. At that point, you wait for the pregnancy check.

### How soon can a mare be checked for pregnancy?

A mare is commonly first checked for pregnancy by ultrasound around 14 to 16 days after ovulation. This is the standard early pregnancy check because it allows the veterinarian to see the pregnancy and, importantly, identify twins early enough to manage them if necessary.

That early check is important not just because everyone wants to know if she is in foal, but because if she is not pregnant, the veterinarian can often make a plan to get her ready for the next cycle without losing unnecessary time.



### Why early checks matter for catching twins

Twin pregnancies are very risky in mares and are generally not something you want to discover late. Less than 10% of twin pregnancies result in both foals surviving and even then the complications and risks to the mare are quite overwhelming. That is one of the big reasons early pregnancy checks are so important. Catching twins at the first check gives the veterinarian the best chance to reduce one of the embryos before the pregnancy advances further.

### When can you see a heartbeat?

A fetal heartbeat is commonly identified around day 24 to 25 of pregnancy on ultrasound.

That appointment is a big one emotionally. The first check tells you there is a pregnancy. The heartbeat check tells you that pregnancy is progressing.

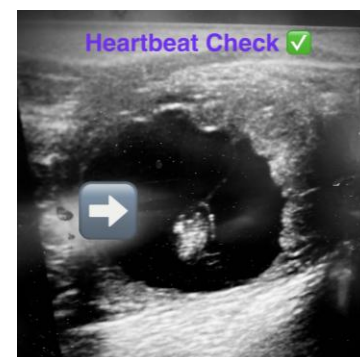
### Why is there usually another pregnancy check after that?

Many veterinarians also perform another check around day 30 to 35 to confirm that the mare is still pregnant and that the pregnancy is developing normally. This matters because there is still some early pregnancy loss in mares, and that follow-up check gives you a better picture of whether things are continuing as they should.

That second or third check can also affect management decisions. If a mare loses the pregnancy very early, there may still be a chance to rebreed her in the same season. If the loss occurs later, options can change.

### Other procedures and terms you may hear during the breeding cycle

Breeding a mare is not always as simple as following a follicle and breeding once at the perfect time. Depending on the mare, the semen type, and what your veterinarian sees on ultrasound, there may be a few additional procedures or medications used along the way. These are not automatically signs that something is wrong. In many cases, they are simply part of good reproductive management.



## Short cycling a mare

When a veterinarian says they want to short cycle a mare, they usually mean they want to bring her back into heat sooner by using a prostaglandin product such as Estrumate. This works by causing the corpus luteum, or CL, to regress. As progesterone drops, the mare can move back toward estrus instead of staying out of heat for the full length of diestrus.

In practical terms, short cycling is what a vet may do when a mare has already ovulated, is no longer in heat, and you do not want to sit and wait for the rest of the cycle to pass naturally. It is a useful tool, but it only works when the mare is in the right stage of her cycle and has a responsive CL.

## Uterine lavage

A uterine lavage is a flush of the uterus with sterile fluid that is then drained back out. This may be done before breeding if the mare has debris, inflammation, or fluid that needs to be addressed first, or after breeding if she is the kind of mare that does not clear the uterus efficiently on her own.

To a mare owner, hearing that a mare needs a lavage can sound alarming, but it is often simply part of helping the uterus stay as healthy and clean as possible during the breeding process.

## Inducing ovulation with deslorelin or hCG

Sometimes your veterinarian may want to induce ovulation so the breeding can be timed more precisely. Two common tools for that are deslorelin and hCG. These medications are typically used when the mare is already in the right stage of estrus and the veterinarian wants ovulation to occur within a more predictable window.

This can be especially helpful when working with shipped semen, where timing is everything. Rather than simply waiting and hoping the mare ovulates at the ideal moment, the vet may use one of these drugs to help tighten that window and improve the odds of matching semen timing more closely to ovulation.

## Using Estrumate

Estrumate is one of the drugs most commonly used to short cycle mares. Owners will sometimes hear it described as a way to bring a mare in, but more accurately, it works by breaking down the CL so the mare can move out of diestrus and back toward heat. Like many reproductive drugs, it is useful when used at the right time and much less useful when the mare is not in the correct phase of her cycle.

**Lutalyse** is another product that you may see used for this same purpose. Lutalyse is a natural prostaglandin while Estrumate is a synthetic analog however they are both effective and their use largely depends on your veterinarian's personal preference.

## Regu-Mate (Altrenogest)

Regu-Mate is the brand name many horse owners know for altrenogest, a synthetic form of progesterone. In practical terms, it acts like progesterone in the body and is often used to suppress heat, help manage estrous behavior, or support certain reproductive plans designed by the veterinarian.

Because it affects the mare's hormonal environment, it is not something to use casually or without a clear reason. Like everything else in reproduction, timing and purpose matter.



## **What it means when a mare is transitional**

When a veterinarian says a mare is transitional, they usually mean she is moving from winter anestrus into her normal cycling season. During this period, the ovaries may wake up enough to grow follicles, but the mare may not yet be cycling in a predictable, efficient way.

That is why transitional mares can be frustrating. They may look like they are coming into heat, they may even grow follicles, but they do not always behave like a fully cycling mare yet. Early spring breeding often comes with more of this kind of inconsistency, which is one reason it can feel less straightforward than breeding later in the season.

## **Why is this information so important for mare owners**

A mare owner does not need to master every technical detail of reproduction, but understanding the basics changes the whole experience.

When your veterinarian says, “She has a nice follicle and good edema,” you know that is a good sign. When they say, “She has already ovulated and now has a CL,” you understand why that cycle’s breeding window has closed. When they say, “Let’s wait and pregnancy check at 14 days,” you understand that they are not stalling; they are following the normal timeline.

That understanding makes you a better client, a better communicator, and a better partner in the process.

The more fluent you become in this language, the less intimidating the breeding process feels. Learning the terms does not just make you sound more knowledgeable. It helps you ask better questions, follow your veterinarian more confidently, and advocate more effectively for your mare.