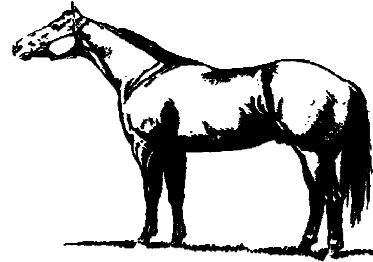


Animal Science Horse Information Series

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PROBLEMS WHEN HORSES GRAZE TALL FESCUE PASTURES

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If your pasture is green, it is likely tall fescue. While other forages are used for horse pastures, tall fescue is the predominant pasture forage in Tennessee.

It is well documented that about 80 percent of all tall fescue pastures tested in the state are infected with a fungus, *Neotyphodium coenophialium*. The level or rate of fungal infection in tested pastures ranged from 70 to 90 percent.

Tall fescue has long been known to cause problems in broodmares. Tall fescue toxicosis in broodmares is responsible for numerous reproductive problems. Mares grazing endophyte-infected tall fescue pastures have longer than normal gestation periods and do not show the typical signs of impending foaling. Foals from mares grazing endophyte-infected tall fescue are thin and look premature when born, and mares often have little or no milk

after foaling. Stillborn foals, dystocias (difficult foalings), foal and mare deaths also occur.

Owners should remove pregnant broodmares from endophyte-infected tall fescue pastures, or any tall fescue pasture if it has not been tested for the fungus. Pregnant mares removed at 300-days of gestation and placed on none tall fescue pasture, stalled or put in dry lots, foal and lactate normally. Owners may choose to remove mares sooner but should do so no later than 300-days of pregnancy.

These mares should be fed adequate amounts of good-quality hay and grain. However, do not feed them tall fescue hay. Tall fescue hay, if from infected fields, is as toxic as an infected pasture.

It is advisable to keep broodmares that will be rebred off endophyte-infected tall fescue pastures until they have been pregnancy tested at 40-days after breeding. Early embryonic death has been shown to be higher in broodmares grazing endophyte-infected tall fescue pasture while being bred, than those on non-endophyte infected pasture.

Owners must also consider proper feeding of yearlings grazing endophyte-infected tall fescue pastures in the spring. Yearlings grazing endophyte infected tall fescue pastures have been shown to have reduced rates of gain or growth compared to yearlings grazing non-endophyte infected tall fescue. Rates of gains were reduced from 1.23 pounds per day for yearlings grazing non-endophyte-infected tall fescue to 0.51 pounds per day for those grazing endophyte-infected tall fescue pastures.

Yearlings fed grain while grazing endophyte-infected tall fescue pasture gained at a rate similar to yearlings grazing non-endophyte tall fescue pasture. Where normal growth is desired on tall fescue pasture, owners should feed an appropriate level of grain.

Yearlings normally have an increase in growth in spring; likely, from the growth of nutritional spring pasture. Yearlings grazing tall fescue pastures should be fed a 12-14 percent high-quality protein grain mix. Yearlings selected for sales, show or performance should be monitored closely when grazing tall fescue pasture to insure desired rates of gain.

Non-breeding mares and pleasure horses ridden only occasionally should do okay on tall fescue pastures. However, endophyte-infected tall fescue pasture may impede performance. A study from Clemson University has shown that horses ridden over rolling hills for 30 minutes per day at a brisk trot took longer to recover their respiratory rates and skin temperature if they grazed endophyte-infected tall fescue pastures. These horses also drank more water than horses treated similarly when on non-endophyte tall fescue pasture.

Owners should lime and fertilize tall fescue pastures according to a current soil test. Adding clovers to tall fescue pasture is also recommended to improve the nutritional value of the pasture. However, adding clover to horse pastures and/or feeding grain will not prevent the adverse effects of endophyte infested tall fescue.

Horses on pasture should have free access to trace mineralized salt and clean, fresh water at all times. Loose trace mineralized salt is preferred to block salt. However, block salt is better than no salt at all.

Since tall fescue is the most common pasture forage in Tennessee for horses, owners should use these recommended management practices for their horses that graze tall fescue pastures.

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