



Caslick's Repair in Mares

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There are many causes of infertility in mares, but one of the most common, especially in older mares, is prolonged contamination of the vagina by fecal material that drops into the vulva. This can eventually cause vaginal infection that can spread to the uterus. The problem can be corrected with a simple procedure known as Caslick's repair, suturing the top part of the vulva lips together (so they grow together) thus sealing off the vulva to keep fecal matter or liquid from being sucked into the vulva.

The contamination problem may be conformational—structural relationship of anus and vulva. The anus, rather than being directly above the vulva as it should be, may have sunk deeper into the body, making the top of the vulva tip upward toward the anus (horizontal rather than vertical). When the mare has a bowel movement, or if liquid seeps out of the anus after passing manure, some of the feces

or fluid may enter the vagina through the vulva.

This sinking of the anus may be due to the mare's conformation or to poor condition. A thin mare has a more sunken anus than a fat mare. The anus may also sink during pregnancy, as the abdomen becomes heavier in late gestation. Many older mares develop sunken anus even if they had correct conformation when young. Older mares that have had many foals may become saggier. A difficult foaling may injure and stretch the vulva, resulting in loss of muscle tone in the lips of the vulva, causing it to sag and gape open.

Even mild cases may be a problem—as the mare trots or gallops, air is sucked into the vagina thus carrying with it any of the bacteria present on the vulva as a result of prior defecation. If the vulva fails to close up properly, galloping causes air to rush in and out of the vagina making a sucking noise. The genital tract is exposed to manure and dirt.

The constant irritation and contamination may overcome the natural defenses of the tissues, and infection gets started. This irritation can also create an unfavorable chemical reaction with the fluid of the genital tract, shortening the life of sperm when the mare is bred, making it almost impossible for her to conceive by natural service. The mare can sometimes be settled (if the infection is just local and hasn't gotten into the uterus yet) by artificial insemination, bypassing the local irritation.

The contamination problem can be prevented with Caslick's repair, which is simple and inexpensive. The vet gives the mare a local anesthetic so there will be no pain during the procedure. Most mares need no special restraint, other than someone holding the head, but if a mare is inclined to kick she can be put behind a gate or stable door—or even two bales of straw, one on top of the other—protecting the vet from a possible kick.

When the tissues are deadened by anesthesia, the vet trims the external edge of the vulva lips, exposing underlying tissues. He puts these surfaces together so they will grow together to

seal off the vulva. The edges are held in place with sutures, clamps or clips. It takes 10 to 14 days for the area to heal and grow together, after which the sutures, clips or clamps can be removed.

Mares show little or no discomfort from this simple operation. But there are exceptions, such as when a mare has been severely torn during foaling and needs more extensive repair—which may require more anesthetic and longer recuperation period. After a major repair she should have four to seven days' stall confinement with little exercise, to give the tissue time to start growing together. This is especially true if the muscular separation between the anus and top of the vulva has been torn and repaired.

If you've bought a mare, or if your mare has come home from being bred, check to see if she has been sutured. Broodmares are sometimes sent home from breeding without instructions about newly placed sutures, which should be removed in a couple weeks after healing is complete. Some types of sutures can be left in without ill effects, but others must be taken out or they'll fester.

If you bought a mare that had an earlier Caslick's, you need to be aware of this before she is bred again, or before she foals. The vaginal opening may be very small or almost nonexistent, and she'll need it opened before breeding (especially before foaling) to prevent tearing and damage to these tissues.

You can check the mare by gently spreading apart the lips of the vulva, beginning near the bottom. If she has not had a Caslick's repair, the opening will extend up to within about two inches of the anus. If she's been repaired, the top part of the vulva will be sealed—there will be just a small opening at the bottom. Most mares don't object to a gentle lifting of the tail to check. But if in doubt as to a mare's reaction, have someone hold her next to a gate or stable door you can stand behind as you look.

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If she's been repaired, and you want to breed her, make sure the vulva is opened again first. The stallion may tear her during breeding unless the vulva opening is still large enough to permit entry and has been protected by a breeding stitch (a heavy cross-stitch at the top of the opening, at the lower end of the suture line) to prevent tearing. If there's insufficient room for access by the stallion, the vulva should be opened before breeding.

After the mare is bred, she should be sutured again to prevent any contamination and infection that might endanger her pregnancy. Mares with serious problems should be closed up again at once. But if her problem is mild, you can wait to make sure she's safely in foal (through one more cycle, in case she must be bred again).

Reopen the mare before foaling, or she'll be damaged as the foal pushes out and tears the tissues apart. This would require a more difficult repair

than if she's opened properly beforehand. If you are observing her constantly, you can wait and open the vulva as she goes into labor. But if there's any chance she might foal with no one attending her, open the vulva a few days before her foaling date so she won't tear if she foals unexpectedly.

The vulva is easy to open. If the suturing was done neatly there will be a straight line of scar tissue where the lips of the vulva were stitched together. This line can be reopened or slit with any sharp instrument such as a razor or scalpel. But it is safest if done with surgical scissors (blunt on one tip). The rounded, blunt tip can be gently inserted into the vulva at the bottom of the opening. Line up the scissors with the scar and do it in one quick cut. Then if she jumps, you already have it done.

Even easier, if the mare is placid, is to gently spread the suture line (stretching it a bit with your fingers, so the scar tissue at the center is quite visible) and then carefully cut up the scar

line, taking several small snips with the scissors. There is no feeling—no nerve tissue—in the scar, so if you stay right on the scar line the mare won't feel pain. There is a lot of stretch in this type of scar tissue, so if you can spread it a little and cut as you go, the mare won't feel it. If you are unsure about her reaction, have someone hold her for you behind a gate, stable door, or straw bales, in case she kicks. But if she is quiet and trusts you, and doesn't mind you working around her hindquarters, she won't give you any problem.

After foaling, she should be sutured again. This can be done within the first 24 hours if there's no swelling or tissue damage from foaling. But if she is swollen, or there's been some tearing, repair should wait until swelling goes down. If she's to be bred back after foaling, and does not have a serious vulva defect (some mares have a problem with contamination only in late pregnancy), it may be practical to wait and suture her after she's back in foal.

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