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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT FROZEN AND CHILLED SEMEN A.I. IN MARES

What are the advantages of frozen semen A.I.?

Larger genetic pool to select your stallion from, e.g. distant and overseas stallions.

The safety for your mare may be improved at some centres.

Travel distances for your mare can be greatly reduced.

The safety of your foal may be improved – there may be less exposure to diseases that may be more common on large studs.

Easier to breed shy mares and mares that are “foal proud”.

In a good centre there maybe far less stress on the mare leading to higher conception rates.

Minimum contamination breeding techniques are usually employed.

Close veterinary attention after breeding means no delay in post breeding treatments such as antibiotic therapy or Caslick’s surgery.

The semen is ready for use when required. May not be the same with chilled semen or with a busy stallion under natural service conditions.

What are the disadvantages of frozen semen A.I.?

Maybe there is a cost increase. You need to compare the total costs at an A.I. centre with the costs of travel, usage fee, service fee, agistment and vet fees plus drugs at a natural breeding stud farm.

There may a significant drop in fertility. This is largely stallion dependant, but may also be associated with the mare’s response to the semen. Some stallions are very easy to freeze and their sperm thaws with good conception rates. Some are much poorer and some cannot be frozen (or even chilled). It may also depend on the extender used to add to the raw sperm before freezing.

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With first season stallions your mare becomes a "guinea pig". You do not have the knowledge of the stallion's fertility rate in previous season(s).

There maybe a potential for higher foetal loss through pregnancy. This is usually early in the pregnancy, if at all.

What influences the success rate?'

The stallion.

The mare: her age and genital conformation, her breeding history.

The experience and success rate of the A.I. Centre and its staff.

The time of the year. The mare cycles best in November, December and January.

The strategic and carefully targeted use of drugs to assist in the timing of service.

The importance of timing service very closely with ovulation.

A low stress environment for the mare.

The ease of the last foaling and her successful cleaning up after foaling.

The season and nutrition and the mare's general health.

What should I do to maximise my chances of success with frozen semen A. I.?

Check out the breeding centre and feel happy it meets your requirements.

Check out the stallion's service to conception rate from previous years.

Discuss with the breeding centre and Vet any special requirements for your mare.

Do not start the mare too early in the season but wait till she is cycling well and has dropped her winter coat. If she is a wet mare, it may be best to miss the foal heat.

If the amount of semen is limited, consider endoscopic guided A.I.

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Bring the mare to the centre at least 10 days (if possible) before you imagine she might cycle next.

If the stallion you have chosen has his semen frozen in maxi straws (not 0.5ml mini straws), ask why this is so. Mini straws usually thaw better, so is there a reason?

What is the difference between chilled and frozen semen A.I.?

Chilled semen will usually live longer in the mare's reproductive tract therefore timing is not so important.

Thus there may be less Vet attention, maybe less drugs used and should be cheaper.

The A.I. maybe done at your own farm if it is reasonably handy to your Vet and you have adequate facilities.

Even some stallions cannot be chilled so find out first if he has been successful.

Chilled semen requires larger volumes of semen and depending on the extender used may increase contamination at insemination.

Murphy's Law applies to organising of collection and transport of semen in the short time frame required. Make sure everyone in the chain is experienced.

The mare owner may be required to organise the collection, transport and pickup of the semen. Be sure you understand the steps.

Some studs will only supply semen on 2 or 3 days a week. This may sometimes make it difficult to inseminate your mare at the right time.

Chilled semen can usually be arranged from and to anywhere within Australia. It can also work with transport from New Zealand and I have even been successful with transport to and from the West Coast of the USA. When dealing with overseas sourced semen there may be quarantine concerns and importation is likely to require AQIS approval in advance and require extra time at the airport of arrival.

Chilled semen usually is as fertile as a natural mating.

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What are all the different contracts that come with frozen semen and should I worry much?

The contracts may vary considerably from stallion to stallion and from stallion centre to stallion centre. It is essential you understand the contracts because they can be as different as selling you a few doses of semen and good luck, to offering a live foal guarantee. The latter is always ideal.

A common contract especially from German horses, involves the sale of 3 doses of semen. This you may think would allow you to serve 1 mare over 3 cycles or 3 mares each with one dose and if you were lucky you would get 3 foals for the price of one. Equally you may get no pregnancies in which case you have lost your money and you may have to buy another 3 straws at another service fee to try to get a foal. It is not always the case that 3 straws will be allowed to produce 3 foals at no extra cost and often the fine print will advise that should more than one foal be produced, a new service fee will be required for each other pregnancy achieved. This is especially so if you wish to register the second or third foal with a breed society. Breeders have also split straws so that they may be able to achieve even more pregnancies or have sold on the excess semen to another breeder as it is now excess to their requirement. My advice is to read these contracts carefully as to whether the contract is selling 3 services with no strings attached or with limits on the outcome. These 3 service contracts can be very messy and before entering into these contracts the mare owner should be very clear as to their rights.

Better contracts are those that offer a live foal guarantee or at least the service be paid for when a 45 day pregnancy test is achieved. If the latter is the contract then the breeder can insure the pregnancy from the 45 day mark and then not be out of pocket should the foal be aborted or not survive to stand and suckle after birth. These contracts should be the norm in my opinion as they resemble the standard situation with a natural breeding contract. In other words, semen will continue to be supplied for however many cycles it takes for the mare to become pregnant, up to the end of that breeding season, at least. Their may be an extra transport fee with each delivery of semen.

In any event, make sure the contract is clear to you before you agree. Buying 3 lots of straws at a charity auction after a glass or two of red and with the contract conditions unknown to you, may not be altogether wise.

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Make sure you understand what is required of you if there is left over semen. Does it have to be returned, can it be on-sold or if you serve another mare what happens if she becomes pregnant?

You will usually be required to agree to a contract with the breeding centre and/or the veterinarian. This is almost always before the mare can be allowed to arrive at the centre. The signature of the truck driver is not sufficient. Read the conditions carefully with regard especially to add on costs that may not have been clear to you during discussions. There may be extra fees over and above the cost per cycle of inseminating your mare. Breeding centres often charge a handling fee, as well as a flat agistment rate. The latter rate may alter in a bad season if extensive hand feeding is required. There is likely to be different fees for wet or dry mares, especially if the foal at foot needs extra care. The attending veterinarian may have a single fee per cycle or there may be add on costs for drugs or any unusual procedures. Make sure you understand the totality of the costs you could incur. You will normally be required to pay all breeding centre and veterinary costs before the mare is allowed to be discharged.

What else should I know about semen that is being stored?

There is a cost incurred in liquid nitrogen and the cost of canisters to store frozen semen. Some centres/vets will wear this cost for the breeding season and maybe until the next breeding season in the case of a regular customer with returning mares. Some may not. Be clear where you stand. Some contracts will have a condition appropriate to the discarding of unused semen after a particular period and after attempts have been made to contact the owner of that semen. Be aware of this condition in your contract. If you are required by the stallion centre to return unused semen make sure the breeding centre is aware of this and can arrange for the return transport.