Intrauterine marbles for estrus suppression in mares – two marbles are not always better than one
H. Grady Bailin, C.E. Freeman, S.K. Lyle
School of Veterinary Medicine, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA

Estrous behavior in performance mares is undesirable (agression, hyperexcitability, musculoskeletal pain). Methods of estrus suppression include progestin supplementation, administration of oxytocin during diestrus, and intrauterine marbles. Marbles can prolong the luteal phase and decrease behavioral estrus in some mares. The efficacy of intrauterine marbles is debatable and severe complications with their use have been reported. The following describes two separate instances of previously unreported complications associated with intrauterine marbles.

Case 1: A 13-year-old Quarter horse mare presented for chronic intermittent colic of 80 days duration. Eight years prior to presentation for colic, two marbles were individually placed into the uterus at three-week intervals to prevent unwanted estrous behavior. Diagnostic tests (complete blood count, serum chemistry, palpation per rectum, transabdominal and transrectal ultrasonography, and gastroscopy), failed to determine the cause of colic. Abdominal radiographs revealed two 4-cm, round, radiopaque structures in the caudal abdomen consistent with enteroliths, uroliths, or uterine marbles. Following induction of estrus with prostaglandin F2alpha and cervical dilation with prostaglandin E1, both marbles were removed and the mare was discharged to the owner’s care. Follow-up 12 months later confirmed no further colic, suggesting that intrauterine marbles were likely the cause of the abdominal discomfort.

Case 2: A 4-year-old Thoroughbred filly had marbles placed in her uterus during her racing career. Before breeding, the attending veterinarian removed one marble. She was mated in Kentucky, pronounced pregnant, and returned to a breeding farm in Louisiana. Three months later she aborted and the uterine contents were submitted for evaluation. Examination of the abortus revealed a second marble that was encased in extra-fetal membranes attached by a pedunculated stalk to the amnion. The stalk was wrapped around the amniotic umbilical cord, resulting in fetal death and abortion.

These cases illustrate that intrauterine marbles are not innocuous and careful examination for multiple marbles is necessary.

General references and supplemental reading