

Semen! A little knowledge goes a long way!

When breeding your mare one of the biggest decisions you will make is picking out her stallion. During this process you will probably bump into different semen options; live cover, fresh cooled and frozen semen. There are advantages and disadvantages to all.

Live cover usually involves the mare traveling to the stallion and being bred 'naturally,' sometimes every other day, during estrus. A properly run breeding operation of this kind can have great success and pregnancy rates can be excellent. Advantages of this breeding style include a potential decrease in overall hands-on management of the mare, possible decrease in financial commitment on the part of the mare owner, and a more 'natural' perception of the breeding process. Please note some breed registries require live-cover. There are also some disadvantages to live cover. Live cover mating comes with inherent physical risk to both the mare and the stallion due to the sheer size of the animals and the potentially aggressive nature of the breeding act. Additionally, attempts to control or supervise the environment can endanger the humans involved. Furthermore, any time there is direct contact between horses there is risk of disease transmission, both venereal and otherwise. Despite the risks mentioned, this may be the best option for some mares and stallions.

Fresh cooled semen is a commonly utilized technique where the stallion's ejaculate is collected in/near his home location, processed, and then shipped in a cooled container to the mare's location. This is a type of artificial insemination, or AI. This technique poses a number of advantages. Fresh cooled semen decreases the physical risk to the stallion, mare, and horse handlers. Additionally, for popular stallions one ejaculate may be processed and doses sent to multiple mares. The risk of disease transmission is also decreased, as there is no horse-to-horse contact. This AI option opens the door for mare owners to have more access to stallions around the country. It must be noted that there are a few disadvantages as well. Breeding with fresh cooled semen requires precise timing to ensure semen arrives when a mare needs it. Because of this, mare management is often more intensive, the financial commitment greater, and with a popular stallion semen may not be available. Additionally, some registries may not allow AI and require live cover (please check with your breed registry).

Frozen semen is another AI technique many stallion and mare owners utilize. The stallion's ejaculate is collected, processed for freezing, and then frozen in liquid nitrogen at -196°C. Frozen semen has many of the same advantages as fresh cooled. Additionally, once frozen, a stallion's genetic material can be held indefinitely! Frozen semen from a popular stallion may be available when fresh cooled may not be; this is particularly nice when breeding a mare who has unpredictable cycles or when semen is needed over a weekend/holiday and fresh cooled semen shipping is unavailable. This option also opens a mare owner's stallion selection to many parts of the world. However, disadvantages may also include increased mare management, financial commitment, and some mares are poor candidates for breeding with frozen semen. As with fresh cooled semen, some registries may not allow AI with frozen semen. Additionally, some stallions may not 'freeze' well and fertility rates with frozen semen may take this stallion's frozen semen off of the table.

In general, all three of the options discussed here can result in successful pregnancies. However, live-cover and fresh cooled semen can have slightly higher pregnancy percentages than frozen semen. Please note, these percentages can vary significantly from stallion to stallion and can be influenced by the processing and handling of semen! Utilizing veterinarians experienced in reproduction can help increase your mare's odds of conceiving and carrying a foal to term. When discussing semen options it is important to note that there are MANY factors influencing fertility and every mare and every stallion is different, i.e. what works for one may not work for another. There are many misconceptions regarding breeding and our best recommendation would be to contact a veterinary practice and discuss your questions and concerns with experienced breeding staff.