

Lucy's Story and the Facts about Premarin Mare

Lucy arrived at Sanctuary One just before Thanksgiving, 2008, undernourished, bones jutting out, infested with lice and worms. When she was brought in by Jackson County Animal control, her rear legs were so swollen that she had difficulty moving. Lucy's disposition was sweet, but subdued, and she was hungry for both food and affection.

Lucy spent 30 days in isolation, and in the first week she had hay in front of her constantly. We slowly introduced high calorie feed and grains to her diet. She was given personal attention for several hours a day, and we began grooming her neglected, matted coat. Initial veterinary results revealed extremely low iron levels and white blood cell count, a high parasite load, and desperate need for a dental float.

Lucy was so neglected that treatments had to be postponed until she had reached a minimal level of health to be able to withstand care. She has gained weight steadily, and been successfully treated for some of the presenting conditions. However, as Lucy progressed, other issues that had not been immediately apparent became increasingly evident and problematic.

Based on observation and the opinion of the attending veterinarian, we believe that Lucy may well be a Premarin mare, as she exhibits many of the classic signs and symptoms, including: lack of coordination in hindquarters, poor circulation, swelling, muscle atrophy, partial paralysis.

As Lucy has received medical treatment, attention, and gained weight, these symptoms are becoming increasingly apparent, as they interfere with her ability to thrive. The weight gain has further stressed her already depleted bones and musculature, to the point that Lucy has difficulty at times staying on all four feet, and getting up, so much so that it has at times required heavy equipment and a sling to raise her from the ground. With the assistance of the Animal Care Committee and the veterinarian, we are closely observing Lucy and making ongoing assessments as to her quality of life.

According to the Wild Mustang coalition website, "Premarin® is a drug whose name originates from a key ingredient, pregnant mare's urine (PMU). It is prescribed to alleviate the symptoms of menopause by substituting equine estrogens for those naturally produced by the human body."

"Current PMU farm guidelines (strictly 'voluntary' guidelines that have no consequences, and are not enforceable) state that for horses weighing under 900 lbs. the width of the stalls should be no less than 3.5 feet in width; for horses over that weight, the width is increased to 5 feet.

This may well be large enough for the horses to lie down -- but so is a coffin for a person. Would you like to sleep in one? While pro-PMU people, PMU farm vets included, say that it's enough room to lie down and sleep, some have contradicted themselves in print by saying that "horses can sleep standing up anyway."

Horses can lock their legs and doze, but they must lie down for their essential 'deep sleep' period (in the wild and in pasture, horses lie down approximately three hours for every twenty-four). As for exercise, the guidelines leave that up to the discretion of the farm." (www.premarin.org)

Premarin mares are brought in each fall, preg-checked, vaccinated, dewormed, have their feet trimmed, their foals weaned (some as young as three months old) then the pregnant ones go into the barn. They stand in tie stalls, haltered, with very limited turn out for exercise, until the farm's quota for estrogen has been reached for that year.

In years past, water was restricted to reduce urine output, but that is no longer the case as the contracts are written for estrogen amount, not volume of urine. Some farms have free choice water bowls at each stall; others are on timers that dispense water numerous times throughout the day.

Each mare has a urine collection harness made of flexible rubber tubing suspended under her tail. Once the collection season has finished, the mares are turned back outside. Some farms keep their mares close to home for foaling; others turn them out to distant pastures, with scant attention. Most foals are born late April through early June, with minimal veterinary care, at best.

A stallion is turned out with each band of mares and their foals on June 1, and mares are bred via natural cover. Studs are pulled from the pastures on August 1, then mares/foals come in again each fall and the cycle begins again.

Mares that aren't pregnant may be sold immediately, or kept for another year to try again. Depending on the farm, the foals may be sold privately, sent to auction, or shipped to a feedlot for slaughter. Some will keep a few fillies as replacements for the barn, and breed them as 2 or 3 year olds for the first time.

A lot of the older mares have joint issues like arthritis, ringbone, etc. likely caused from standing on hard ground for repeated PMU seasons. Their temperaments and training level vary greatly, some likely had "real lives" prior to becoming PMU mares, are quiet and friendly. Others want nothing to do with people, and are visibly nervous when they have to come into contact with us.

There were more than 450 PMU farms operating in 2003, with over 45,000 mares "online." After studies linked hormone replacement therapy with increased health risks, Ayerst Organics cut many of their contracts, reducing the number of mares to around 6,500 currently. Farms are located in North Dakota, and the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

NAERIC is the non-profit association representing PMU farms. You can see their website at www.naeric.org.