

# *Equine Health Solutions*

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## **The Foaling Mare and Newborn**

### **Watching for Signs**

If your mare has made it through 11 months of pregnancy, you are no doubt excited and anxious to get her safely through the birthing process. The problem is, you may not be there to witness the long awaited event! But don't worry, she is unlikely to need your help anyway. You can, however, be watching for signs and clues that she will soon give birth. Here are some general signs to watch for:

- The mare's udder begins filling with milk 2-4 weeks prior to foaling
- The muscles of the vulva and croup relax. The tailhead may become more prominent a few days prior to foaling.
- The teats become engorged 4-6 days prior to foaling. "Waxing" of the teats, occurs 1-4 days prior to foaling. Waxing is a secretion of a yellow honey like substance called colostrum. If the mare loses too much colostrum the newborn foal's immune protection will be compromised.
- The mare may become anxious and restless and almost appear colicky. She may pace, lie down and get up, look or bite at her flanks, and sweat. She may frequently raise her tail and urinate, which is generally the first signs of labor. Note: If such behavior is prolonged for more than an hour or two without progress towards foaling, colic may be a possibility and you should contact your veterinarian immediately.

### **Preparing for Birth**

Most mares foal without difficulty and it is usually best to leave her undisturbed and unassisted. Here are a few things you can do to prepare:

- Have your veterinarian's phone number readily available by all telephones.
- Keep a watch or clock on hand to time each stage of labor. Have pen and paper for notes.
- Wrap the mare's tail with a clean wrap when you observe the first stage of labor. Be sure not to wrap too tightly as to cut off circulation and permanently damage the tail.
- Wash the mare's udder, vulva, and hindquarters with a mild soap and rinse thoroughly.
- Clean and disinfect the stall as thoroughly as possible and provide adequate bedding.

### **Three Stages of Labor**

**Stage one:** Begins with the onset of contractions and generally lasts 1-2 hours. The mare may stand up, lie down, and roll several times in an effort to properly position the foal for delivery. Contractions are moving the foal through the cervix and into position in the birth canal. The fetal membranes may become visible at the mare's vulva. When the sac breaks, signaled by a rush of fluid, stage one ends.

**Stage two:** The actual expulsion of the foal moves rather quickly. If it takes more than 30 minutes for the mare to deliver, there may be a problem. If there is no significant progress within 10-15 minutes after the membranes rupture, call your veterinarian immediately. If labor seems to be progressing normally, just wait and watch. The normal presentation of the foal resembles a diving position, with front feet first, one slightly ahead of the other, hooves down, followed closely by the nose, head, neck, shoulders, and hindquarters. If you notice the hooves with the soles up, the foal may be backwards or upside down. In this event or of any deviation from the normal delivery position, call your veterinarian immediately.

**Stage three:** The phase during which the afterbirth (placenta) is expelled. Most placentas are passed within 1-6 hours after the foal is delivered; if not, call your veterinarian. A retained placenta can cause serious problems, including massive infection and laminitis. If the mare has passed the placenta and the cord is still attached to the foal, the cord can be manually separated (see below).

### **Postpartum Care**

**Fetal membranes:** Allow the foal to break the fetal membranes and once it breaks through, make sure it is breathing.

**Umbilical cord:** If the umbilical cord is not broken during delivery, it will usually break when the mare or foal gets up. The cord should break at a site approximately 2" to 6" from the foal's abdomen where the cord's diameter is slightly narrower than the remainder of the cord. If it does not break, it should be held firmly on either side of the intended break site, then twisted and pulled to separate. Twisting and pulling of the cord stimulates closure of the umbilical vessels and reduces the chance of hemorrhage from the cord stump. If bleeding persists from the stump, pressure can be applied by squeezing with thumb and forefinger for several minutes. After the cord breaks, dip the foal's naval in gentle iodine or Chlorhexadine solution within 1-2 hours.

**Foal Enema:** Give the foal one adult mineral type (Fleet) enema within 3-4 hours of birth, even if it is passing stool.

**Monitoring the Mare and Foal:** Let the mare and foal rest together as long as possible, giving them the opportunity to bond undisturbed. The foal should stand and nurse within 2 hours of birth; it should be bright and alert to its new surroundings. Check the mare's temperature within the first 24 hours (normal is 99.5 to 101.5); an elevated temperature may indicate an infection. She should be bright, alert and accepting of her newborn. Allow her to eat as soon as she is ready and supply plenty of fresh water.

**IgG Level:** Colostrum, the mare's first milk, is very high in antibodies. Foals are born without protection from disease and rely on the antibodies they absorb from the colostrum for immunity, until about six months old. A simple test done by your veterinarian within 18-36 hours after birth on the foals blood serum, can evaluate the IgG antibody level. If the level is inadequate, treatment will then be instituted by your vet.

***“Providing Quality Solutions for the Health of Your Horse”***