

Foaling Season – Just around the corner
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Foaling season is nearing and is already here for some. While this is an exciting time for most, for an unlucky few it can be quite devastating. The foaling process in the mare, unlike many other species, is a very quick and explosive event which means when things go wrong they go wrong quickly. It is for this reason that many horse owners go to great lengths to observe the foaling process. Knowing what to expect and familiarizing yourself with the wide range of normal behavior during the foaling process will greatly increase your chance of a happy ending in the event of an emergency.

In the horse, there are three recognized stages of labor. The first stage can last anywhere from 4 hours to 30 minutes and ends when the foal enters the birth canal. During this first stage the mare will often appear agitated or mildly colicky as the foal positions itself and the mare begins to have mild contractions. The second stage commences as the foal moves through the birth canal and usually, although not always, coincides with the release of the allantoic fluids (i.e. “water breaks”). Once the foal enters the birth canal the mare begins having very strong, sometimes described as violent, contractions and the foal is normally delivered within 20-30 minutes. The front feet, one in front of the other and pointing downward, should be the first to be observed to pass through the vulva. The feet will be followed by the nose of the foal as his head and neck are extended and appear to be resting on his forelimbs. Once the pelvis of the foal has passed some mares will take a break to rest while the hind limbs of the foal remain within the birth canal. The third and final stage of labor deals with the passage of the placenta which usually occurs within 30 minutes of the foal being born but can take up to 3 hours and still be considered normal.

Dystocia is a term, which you may have heard from your veterinarian, used to describe a problematic or difficult birth. The malpositioned foal is probably the most common and most widely recognized cause for a “foaling gone wrong,” however; one must not forget there are a multitude of problems that can occur. A prolonged or failure to progress in the first and second stages of labor should be a red flag that something is awry and a veterinarian should be contacted immediately. Once stage two has begun the foal has less than one hour to be delivered for a good chance of survival. After an hour of active labor (stage 2) not only have you most likely lost the foal, but the health and potentially the life of the mare is at risk. There are several types of dystocia that can only be corrected surgically under general anesthesia. Therefore, when the foal is of great value, either emotionally or monetarily, you may consider having the mare foal within a few minutes drive of a surgical facility, and it is always a good idea to have the trailer hooked up and ready go.

Once the foal is on the ground there are some important and necessary hurdles it must accomplish within the first few hours of life. The foal should be able to stand and nurse within the first 3 hours of birth. The colostrum or the first milk that the foal ingests will provide the foal with important antibodies that will help protect the foal against infections for up to 3 – 4 months. Unfortunately, not all mares produce quality colostrum or the mare may have leaked out the colostrum in the days preceding parturition. Some foals are born weak or have severe limb deformities which may prevent them from standing

and getting the mare's colostrum. In this case when the foal is not making any attempt to rise within 30 minutes or is it unable to stand within 3 hours, a veterinarian should be contacted immediately. Whether the foal is unable to rise or the mare does not have good quality colostrum, the foal is at risk and more susceptible to infection, although it may appear completely healthy at birth in the latter situation. Newborn foals have very little reserves and can deteriorate quickly so it is of utmost importance to detect problems early. For this reason, it is highly recommended that all foals undergo a thorough examination by a veterinarian at 12-24 hours of age. At this time, your veterinarian can measure the level of antibody in the blood of the foal to determine if the foal received a sufficient quality and amount of colostrum. These tests are quick and in the event the IgG level is low your veterinarian may choose to administer equine plasma to supplement the foal with the needed antibodies they are missing. Your veterinarian can also evaluate the foal for any non-life threatening issues that may need to be addressed such as fractured ribs or minor limb deformities.

The mare can also encounter post-foaling complications and she should be monitored closely along with the foal. Due to the extreme force of uterine contracture, the mare can cause internal injury to herself during the birthing process, for example, some mares can rupture their uterus or a major uterine artery. Therefore, if the mare becomes violently painful or listless at any time following the foaling process, it is a cause to be alarmed and you should contact your veterinarian immediately. The most common post-foaling complication in the mare is a retained placenta. As mentioned above the placenta should pass within 3 hours and when it does pass it should be inspected for any tears or missing sections. The placenta or a small piece of placenta which remains in the mare for longer than 3 hours has the potential to lead to severe consequences such as laminitis, septic metritis, or even death. If you are not sure what a normal placenta should look like, it is a good idea to save it for your veterinarian to inspect, especially if the foal appears sickly. If the mare fails to pass the placenta after 3 hours she is considered to have "retained her placenta" and your veterinarian should be contacted to discuss treatment options. The mare, like the foal, can benefit from a post-foaling exam by a veterinarian. The mare can be evaluated for any vaginal or cervical tears along with other problems that may not be obvious by just observing the mare.

The purpose of this brief overview of the foaling process is not to address all the things that can go wrong when a mare foals, but to emphasize the urgency of the situation. Quickly recognizing when your mare is having a problem can easily be the difference between life and death for the mare or foal, and often both. I highly recommend to anyone who does not have experience foaling out mares to seek out and have the availability of a knowledgeable, qualified person when their mare foals. Arrangements can often be made to have your mare transported to and boarded at a facility in the last month where there are experienced personnel available to monitor and foal out the mare. Should you decide to foal out your own mare be sure to do your homework and remember - if you even THINK your mare might be having a problem foaling, don't wait, CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN.