

## PREPARING FOR YOUR NEW FOAL

Awaiting the birth of your new foal is often a very anxious and exciting time. After approximately eleven months of waiting, all your extra care for your pregnant mare is about to pay off. Mares prefer to foal at night in privacy, and apparently have some control over their delivery. It is common for an owner to check their mare and return in a short period of time to find mother and foal resting in their stall. While attention to the mare and foal is important, careful and quiet observation is recommended unless an obvious problem is visible or there is some previous history of a high risk pregnancy. An observed, but unobtrusive delivery is the safest. In the event that a problem has arisen, your veterinarian's phone number should be clearly posted. Prompt action is vital if any problem is encountered. Alerting your veterinarian early in the day if you suspect that your mare will foal that night is always helpful in risky situations.

Providing a safe, quiet, and clean foaling area is the first step for a successful experience. A large box stall (14' x 14') that is located in a low traffic area of the barn is adequate. Stall construction that allows for easy cleaning and disinfection is recommended. Dirt or clay footing is difficult to disinfect, while slick flooring is contraindicated. Deep bedding with clean straw is preferred. Wood shavings cling to the wet foal and can be dusty, resulting in airway irritation and harbor a greater number of pathogenic microbes.

The average gestation of most mares is 338-343 days; however a normal term can range from 320-380 days. Subtle signs can sometimes be seen prior to foaling, but great variability exists between individual mares.

The following list is a general guidelines:

- The mare's udder begins filling out 2-4 weeks prior to foaling
- The muscles of the vulva and croup relax. The tail head may become more prominent a few days prior to foaling.
- The teats become engorged 4-6 days prior to foaling.
- "Waxing" occurs in some mares. Waxing occurs when colostrum (the first honey-like milk that is rich in components vital to a foals survival) secretion appears 1-4 days prior to foaling. The secretion may drip, and the udder may even drip milk several days prior to birth.
- If a mare begins dripping colostrum prematurely at any time during gestation, call your veterinarian as this could indicate problems or an impending abortion. Early loss of colostrum can lead to reduced protective antibody available to the foal.
- The mare becomes anxious and restless. She may appear to be colicky and lift her tail and urinate frequently. This behavior is associated with Stage I labor, however beware that colic remains a possibility. If this behavior continues greater than 1-2 hours with no progress, contact your veterinarian immediately.



Most mares foal without difficulty, thus it is usually best to allow the mare to foal undisturbed and unassisted. Careful assessment from a distance with attention to timing is advised.

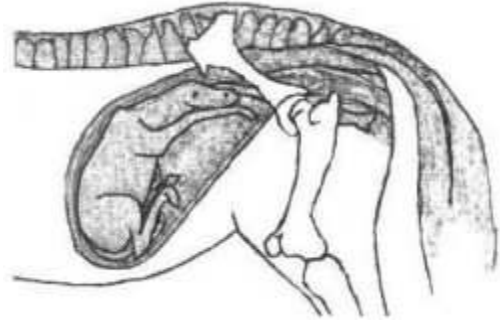
**Labor is divided into three stages: Stage I, II, and III.**

**Stage I** labor can last for extended periods (generally 1-2 hours), however the onset of this stage is often difficult to recognize due to the variability in signs. Stage I delivery includes the time allowed for the fetus to reposition prior to birth and up to the rupture of the first waterbag (Chorioallantois) During this stage you can carefully and quietly:

- Make sure you are paying close attention to the time. When you're worried or anxious, your perception of time becomes distorted.

- Wrap the mare's tail with a clean wrap when you observe the first stage labor. Be sure that the wrap is not applied too tightly or left on too long as it can cut off circulation and permanently damage the tail.
- Wash the mare's udder, vulva, and hindquarters with a mild soap and rinse thoroughly.
- Pick out the stall quietly.

**Stage II** is the actual expulsion of the foal. This stage is relatively quick in a normal foaling, approximately 20 minutes. If the waterbag has ruptured and you have not seen any progression in 15 minutes, call your veterinarian immediately. If this stage is greater than 30 minutes and still no foal on the ground, there is a high probability that there is a problem. The normal foaling position for a fetus is that the front feet come first, one slightly farther ahead than the other. The soles of the feet should be facing towards the mares legs. This gives the impression that the foal is "diving" out of the mare.



If there is any deviation from this presentation or the nose does not appear shortly after the feet are exposed, call your veterinarian immediately. Stage II labor ends once the foal has been completely expelled.

General guidelines after the foal has been delivered are as follows:

- Ensure that the amniotic sac is not covering the foal's nose, preventing the foal from breathing. This can be observed from a distance.



- Following birth many foals will lay next to the mare for a short time, still connected to the umbilical cord. Do not cut the umbilical cord and allow the foal or mare to tear it with time. If the foal must be moved for a more serious reason, the cord must be twisted and pulled apart at a length of 1-2 inches from the foal's abdomen. Severe bleeding can occur if the cord is cut.



- Disinfect the stump with a 0.5% diluted Nolvasan solution, continue this several times over the next 24 hours. This solution can be made by adding one part Nolvasan to three parts water.
- Encourage the mare and foal to rest as long as possible by getting out of eye-sight once you have determined there are no immediate problems.
- Do not attempt to pull a foal from the birth canal unless you are experienced or under the supervision of a professional. Damage to the mare and foal is a common problem associated with untrained assistance, some of which may reduce the mare's fertility, fracture fetal bones, cause severe hemorrhage, or result in death to the mare and/or the foal.
- If a large red-velvety sac appears at the vulva, this may indicate premature placental separation. This condition is commonly called "Red-Bag" and you must contact your veterinarian immediately for assistance.



Veterinary attention is warranted if the foal does not have a regular breathing rate within 30 seconds, however professional intervention at this point is difficult due to the delay of assistance. It is safe to say that within the first several minutes of birth, every second counts. Consider referral to a breeding farm or referral hospital late in gestation if you are not experienced in foaling and are uncomfortable with knowing what to do if a problem arises. Problems in the perinatal period can lead to life-threatening and expensive outcomes.

**Stage III** labor is the stage required for passing the placenta (afterbirth). Most afterbirth is passed within 1-3 hours after the foal is delivered. If the placenta is not passed within 3 hours, call your veterinarian. Retained placenta can be a serious and life-threatening condition in mares. Once the placenta has passed, it should be saved and set aside for careful evaluation to ensure it is complete and does not have any abnormalities. If there is question regarding the placental integrity, your veterinarian should be alerted.



As expressed above, observation is crucial to successful foaling. Attention to the following points is advised following birth:

- The foal should be bright and alert to its surroundings, breathing normally, and attempt to stand within 30-45 minutes.
- The mare should be non-aggressive, curious, and accept her newborn. If the mare shows aggression or signs of rejection, the foal should be separated and reintroduced with the mare under restraint. Foal rejection can be seen more commonly in maiden mares.



- The foal should stand and nurse within 2 hours of birth. If this period is prolonged, it may be a sign of a more serious condition. Colostrum (first milk) is vital to foal survival and prompt attention to nursing quality is important. Do not be misled into false security that the foal is pointed towards the udder; he or she must be successfully attaching to the teat and swallowing milk.



- Foals will nurse for 5-10 minute intervals, several times per hour. The normal foal will spend a major portion of the remaining time of the hour laying down and resting.
- Foals should pass meconium (first feces that is dark and sticky) within 12 hours and should urinate normally.
- Meconium staining (characteristic brown color) at birth is an indication of fetal stress and consulting your veterinarian is encouraged.

Examination of the mare and foal should be done by your veterinarian in 18-24 hours following foaling (sooner if a problem has arisen). Serious and life threatening conditions can occur in both mare and foal immediately following foaling. Examination and routine procedures offer an opportunity for intervention of a problem before it becomes serious. Any questions should prompt veterinary consultation immediately, delay may result in expensive medical costs and possibly fatal situations. Thankfully, foaling problems are rare and early professional intervention can greatly reduce the risk of serious complications.