

A Guide to Foaling

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As we enter the foaling season, we are reminded of important facts about the birthing process. It is helpful to be prepared for complications in the event that one occurs. Below is a basic outline on how to be best prepared for your new foal.

Stall Preparation

If you plan on having your mare foal in a stall, be sure to wash the stall with detergent beforehand. Strip the bedding down to mats and scrub them well (don't forget the walls and the manger). Be sure to rinse well. Disinfect the stall with dilute bleach (1 part bleach to 32 part water). A birthing stall should be at least 16 feet x 16 feet in size. Straw bedding is superior to shavings because straw is less dusty and carries fewer bacteria.

Gestation Period

The normal gestation length for a mare is 320-345 days. Foals cannot survive if they have spent less than 300 days in utero. Mammary growth occurs in the last two weeks of pregnancy. Mares will "wax up" (form a yellow bead of colostrum at the end of the teat) about 24 hours prior to parturition. You may also notice relaxation of the pelvic ligaments around the tail head of your mare.

Items to have in your Foaling Kit

- Chlorohexidine (nolvasan) solution for umbilical dip
- Towels
- Tail wrap
- Liquid Ivory soap and clean wash rag
- Clean buckets
- Thermometer
- Stethoscope
- Flashlight
- Latex gloves
- Clean string to tie off umbilicus if it bleeds
- Foal blanket
- Pen and paper
- Veterinarian's emergency phone number

Reasons to contact your veterinarian prior to foaling

If your mare is streaming milk prior to birthing, it could be a sign of a complication. Depending on your veterinarian's recommendations, it may be necessary to milk out the mare and store the colostrum. If you notice vulvar discharge before day 320 of gestation, it could be a sign of vaginitis or placentitis – the number one cause of late term abortion in the mare. You should also contact your vet if your mare has a prolonged gestation. This could be a sign of delayed fetal development, fetal mummification, or endophyte-infected fescue toxicity.

When your mare is showing signs of imminent parturition

Wrap your mare's tail. Be sure that her Caslick's is removed (if applicable). Wash the mare's udder and flanks with ivory soap and rinse well. Your mare should be checked on every 1-2 hours so that the foaling can be attended. There are good video camera options available that can send live feed images to a smart phone or a Foalert system can be placed by your veterinarian. Be sure all of your foaling supplies are near the stall.

The Normal Birthing Process

Stage 1: This stage can last for minutes to hours. During this stage, the foal is getting in the appropriate position for birth. The mare may lie down, pace, sweat, look colicky and appear restless. If your mare is disturbed during this time, the progressive stages of labor may stop. Remember, the foal determines the day it will be born, the mare determines the time. Mares do not like commotion when they are foaling – this is against all of their instincts. If you and your family members are present, be quiet and watch from a distance.

Stage 2: Lasts 20-30 minutes. The beginning of Stage 2 is the rupture of the chorioallantois (water breaking). You will see protrusion of the amniotic sac through the vulva (white bulging tissue). The foal should present with its front feet first and the foals back up and against the mares back. One foot should be 6-8 inches in front of the other so the shoulders are not coming through the birth canal at the same time. The muzzle should be at the level of the knees. During this stage, progress is key! Please remember that mares have been foaling for many years without our help, so if things appear to be progressing normally, avoid the temptation to rush into the stall with the mare. She will much prefer foaling in private (you can watch from a distance).



Stage 3: Passage of the placenta. This should occur within three hours of delivery.

Any variation from this birthing schedule should alert you to a problem and you should contact your veterinarian.

Dystocia (difficult birth)

The number one sign of a dystocia is lack of progress during the birthing process. This could be due to improper positioning of the foal, premature placental separation (red bag delivery), oversized foal, twins, congenital abnormalities (malformation), and problems on the mare's side (narrow pelvic canal, infection, failure of the uterus to contract).

Newborn Foal 1, 2, 3's

Within 1 hour, the foal should stand. Within the first 30 seconds of birth, the foal should breathe normally at about 60-80 breaths per minute. The foal will typically sit up in a sternal position in 5-10 minutes. A suckle reflex should be noted. The foal will attempt to stand quite quickly and should be standing within an hour of birth. We all know it is tempting to rush in and touch/interact/help the baby, but if the mare and foal appear to be doing well, it is best to monitor from a distance, as this is an important bonding time for the mare and foal.



Within 2 hours, the foal should nurse. Once your foal stands, he should begin udder seeking. Allow your mare to help her foal find the udder. If the foal appears to continually have trouble finding the udder, you can help direct him to it by gently pushing him to her udder and squirting milk around his muzzle. Please note that some mares are extremely protective of their foals and they may become agitated with you in the stall.

Within 3 hours, the placenta should pass. Once the foal has been delivered and the mare has had some time to bond, you can enter the stall and tie the placenta in a knot to keep her from stepping on it. Once the placenta has passed, gather it up and place it in a plastic bag for your veterinarian to examine.

Any deviation from this schedule is a reason to call your veterinarian. If your foal has difficulty standing, it may be a sign of a limb deformity such as contracted tendons. If your foal is having trouble finding the udder (suckling on walls, etc), this could be a sign of Hypoxic Ischemic Encephalopathy (Dummy Foal Syndrome), a condition that requires immediate treatment. If your mare does not pass her

placenta, she is at risk of developing a serious infection and subsequent laminitis. All of these conditions require immediate treatment.

Umbilical Care

You should dip your foal's umbilicus with dilute chlorhexidine solution every 6-8 hours during the first 24 hours of life. Do not use iodine! This can cause burning and skin irritation, which may lead to infection and patent urachus (urinating from the umbilicus).

Hopefully, the birthing process will be uneventful and you will have a healthy foal on the ground. To be sure both the mare and foal are doing well, they should be examined by a veterinarian 12-18 hours after the foal is born. During this examination, your veterinarian will check to be sure your foal has received enough colostrum from the mare. Colostrum contains immunoglobulins that help to develop the foal's naïve immune system. If your foal has not received enough colostrum, he will need additional support to prevent infection in the future. Your veterinarian will also evaluate the foal's eyes, mouth, heart, lungs, umbilicus, and legs to be sure all are healthy. The mare will be examined for vulvar tearing and signs of internal bleeding.

