



The Art of Weaning

Weaning can be an extremely stressful time in both the mare and foal's life. It is possible to mitigate some of that stress by employing good, safe practices and proper nutrition.

Timing

The ideal time to wean the foal is between the ages of 4-6 months. At this time the foal has usually developed quite a lot of natural independence, is relying less and less on the mare's milk for nutrition and has (hopefully) acquired good social skills from its dam.

Reasons to wean earlier may include poor body condition of the mare despite free feeding or health conditions of the mare or foal.

Methods

Rapid or "cold turkey" weaning though often times the most convenient, has numerous disadvantages. There is usually a tremendous amount of stress put on the mare and foal which can lead to self-inflicted injuries, stomach ulceration, colic, dehydration and a compromised immune system for the foal. Mitigating the stress of rapid weaning involves 1) having foals who are housed with other foals and have an established and healthy herd dynamic 2) making sure the foals are well used to solid feed stuffs (creep feeding) 3) leaving the foals in the living environment they are used to and remove the mares to another location. If possible, gradual weaning is the preferred method.

Gradual weaning is the least stressful for the mare and foal. There are various methods of gradual weaning however discussed in this article will be the fence method. This involves separating mares and foals by a fence line. This can be done in either individual pairs or in pasture groups. There are some mare/foal pairs such as first time mares or particularly nervous mares who are better off fence weaned on their own in a barn vs the group pasture wean. This method allows foals to seek out emotional support from their dam but remove the nursing. Hay can be placed at the fence line on both the mare and foal's side for the first few days to allow them to eat comfortably near each other. Gradually the feeding location can be moved further and further from the fence line. Fence weaning can be carried out over 5-10 days depending on the individuals' needs and usually results in very little stress for the mares or foals. A good

natured gelding or retired broodmare may be left with the foals to provide emotional support as well as continued good socialization skills.



Feeding:

Milk Replacer

Should weaning need to be accomplished < 3 months of age a commercial equine milk replacer in either liquid or pellet form should be available to the foal. Note that cow's milk is not an adequate substitute for mare's milk as it has a much different nutritional content.

Creep Feeding

Creep feeding is when foal specific concentrates are offered to the foal before weaning in a way that the mare cannot access the feed. There are numerous ways to offer creep feeding depending on if the foal is solitary with its dam or in a group pasture environment. Creep feeding should start between 2-3 months of age so the foal's hindgut starts to develop the ability to properly digest solid feeds and he gets proper nutrition as he gets less nutrition from the mare. The feed label on weanling concentrates provides some information on how much to be feeding at each life stage. In general feeding 1lb of concentrate/100lb of weight (or 1lb/month of age) is a good rule. Be sure to consult your veterinarian for his/her recommendations on types of concentrates to meet your specific breed or regional needs.

Post-Weaning

Weanlings are not little horses. Their digestive system is still developing and they do not have the ability to utilize forage as a sole source of calories as an adult does. They need a significant portion of their calories to be from a concentrate source. Depending on the type of forage you feed your weanling and his breed, weanlings require 1.0-1.5lb/100lb of body weight in concentrate.

Hay should be a good quality grass hay. It is best if the protein content of your hay is known-protein and sugar content can vary widely within the same type of hay. Hay analysis is inexpensive and easy. Knowing the protein content will help you make decisions on what type/how much concentrate to use or to know if you should add alfalfa hay etc.

Body condition of weanlings should remain on the slender side (hint of rib showing) to avoid rapid growth related problems.

The weaning method and nutrition program you choose for your weanling can affect him lifelong. Be sure to seek out the opinion of your veterinarian to help you make the best possible decisions for your youngster.