

Pre-Foaling, Foaling, and Post-Foaling needs for a healthy mare and foal

Richard A Mansmann, VMD, PhD

Many foalings are unattended and most foalings work out well for both mare and foal thus the owner. However in the up to 20% of foalings that don't work out well, it can be emotionally and financially devastating to the owner and potentially fatal for the foal and/or the mare. If you are considering breeding your mare, the following is a list of things that need to be considered seriously and timely in the last month of pregnancy, during foaling, and following foaling. You should show this list to your veterinarian(s) and go over it thoroughly with them.

Pre-foaling

Pregnancy

- The most important thing about pregnancy is to know that your mare is pregnant and to know the last breeding date. The foal should be expected 11 months, minus 10 days, after the last breeding date. It is always wise to have a mare pregnancy checked early in January to know that she is in foal so that proper preparations can be made. If she is not in foal, proper preparations for the upcoming breeding season can be made also.
- The mare's foot care should be monitored every 6-8 weeks so that her feet are well protected and the possibilities of subsequent problems during delivery and post foaling are significantly reduced.
- Vaccination for Rhinopneumonitis every 2 months, starting at 2 months, during pregnancy is also important.

Last month of pregnancy

- In the last month of pregnancy the mare should be evaluated for her nutritional status to ensure that she is neither too heavy nor too light, but getting the proper amount of feed.
- The mare should be vaccinated to increase the antibodies in the colostrum (foal's first milk) to diseases, such as Tetanus, Eastern/Western Encephalomyelitis, West Nile Virus, and Influenza.
- Get her annual Coggin's Test
- Ideally, the mare should have a neonatal isoerythrolysis blood test to help rule out a red cell incompatibility between the mare and the foal.

Foaling

- You need to decide from the beginning whether or not the mare should be observed. Most mares foal at night. Many mares will foal when you go to get coffee. However, if the mare is beginning to get into trouble and you observe her within the first hour of trouble, positive steps can be taken. However, if the mare is not going to be observed, one has to realize that, in the morning, you may find a very serious medical problem.

- The veterinarian should be informed when the foaling is imminent. If the veterinarian will be out of town, you should obtain from him/her the name and contact information of their back-up emergency veterinarian in the event of an emergency. Ask your veterinarian to warn that veterinarian of your mare's impending foaling.
- The foaling process is probably the most important true emergency in equine veterinary medicine and surgery. It is at this time that an experienced individual can move a limb or a head, or make a determination that can be life-saving for the foal and/or the mare. If delayed two to three hours, this delay can have a fatal effect.
- Once the water breaks, the foal should become apparent within 15 to 30 minutes.
- You should see a whitish, glistening covering over the front feet and the nose. This will open as the foal is delivered. If you see a "red bag," this is an emergency situation because the entire placenta is coming with the foal and the foal will lose oxygen. Your veterinarian should be contacted and the red bag needs to be opened (or cut immediately) to allow the foal to deliver through the placenta.

Post Foaling

Immediate Post-Foaling

- After the foal is delivered, it is best to leave the mare and foal alone for 30 to 60 minutes to allow for bonding and emptying of blood from the placenta.
- The foal should be **on its feet in one hour and nursing in two hours**. If this time frame is extended by an hour, the situation becomes an emergency and veterinary care needs to be considered immediately.
- In this immediate post-foaling time, some mares, due to cramping as the uterus contracts, will act mildly colicky and break out into a sweat again. This can be normal. However, if these colicky signs persist over one hour or intensify, veterinary assistance should be sought to rule out any abnormal ruptures of internal blood vessel or uterus during the foaling process.

Post-foaling Concerns

- Within 12 to 24 hours, (ideally, the next morning or afternoon,) the foal should have a veterinary examination and have blood drawn to determine that the foal has received the proper amount of antibodies (IgG) into its bloodstream from suckling on colostrums. The absorption of antibodies through the gastrointestinal tract and into the bloodstream is accomplished within 12 hours and generally will not improve beyond 24 hours since the intestinal tract "closes" to these large proteins (this is the value of vaccinating the mare in the last 30 days to give the foal protection). If the results of the blood IgG test can sometimes be done stall-side or can be readily available at the veterinarian's office within an hour or two. The results should be known that evening. If the foal has an inadequate amount of antibody, it needs to have a transfusion of plasma as soon as possible. This foal is at high risk for the potential of a blood infection that can be immediately

life threatening. These infections can also result in joint infections and alter the athletic and even long-term life of the foal.

- If at any time the foal acts depressed, seems to be laying down more, the mare's udder enlarges or squirts milk on its own, this foal is a strong candidate for a blood infection and needs to be hospitalized where it can have a blood culture and blood chemistry evaluation immediately. It needs to be placed on proper fluid, nutrition, and antibiotic treatment as soon as possible. The faster the foal gets to a facility with these capabilities and gets the necessary attention, the less the chance of dire results and less expense to the owner. Foals that have been down for 6 to 12 hours probably have a minimal chance of survival or, if they do survive, it will be at a costly medical effort.