

Preparing for Baby

Eleven months is a long time to wait for a healthy, newborn foal. Be ready to assist your mare if emergencies occur.

By Toots Banner, DVM

As the time for foaling gets closer, the experience takes on a whole new urgency. Will the foal arrive premature? Will there be enough colostrum? Will the foal's legs be crooked? Will it have enough strength to nurse? Getting prepared for normal foaling events is one thing – but are you prepared for all the potential hazards surrounding the course of foaling?

Prep Time

In the weeks prior to foaling, there are several ways to monitor the mare and the foaling process. It is a good idea to monitor the birth process because anything can go wrong in a matter of minutes. An attended delivery will allow the detection of any problems before, during or immediately after the birth. The first method is visual on-site monitoring, which usually leads to many sleepless nights. I can't tell you how many times clients tell me they have watched their mare for 48 hours straight, then then go get a shower and cup of coffee – just to return and find the newborn foal lying in the stall. Closed-circuit TV's and wireless cameras are available that allow you to visually monitor from the comfort from your own home.

These cameras normally require keeping the stall lighted for good images, but now an infrared system has been developed for use in total darkness. There are also many types of foaling alarms, which should alert you by various methods to the impending birth of your new foal.

Make sure the mare has adequate foaling space in a large stall with thick, dust-free bedding, which is necessary for comfort and safety. Check the stall for hazards hanging on the walls, doors or on the floor. After checking the environment, prepare a foaling kit and have it close by to address the normal post-foaling procedures. Keep a small container of 2 percent iodine solution, which should be applied to the foal's navel two to three times. Apply the iodine using a shot glass held up against the belly. An enema should be included for use only if the foal has difficulty passing the meconium. Have towels to dry around the face and eyes and a syringe or bottle in the event that feeding colostrum becomes necessary. Keep the number of your veterinarian near the phone, in case of emergency. Prior to foaling, contact your veterinarian for his or her individual foaling guidelines.

In the Moment

After the mare has begun labor and her "water" has broken, uterine

contractions are normally very strong. Close monitoring is important at this time because you should soon see front hooves coming through the birth canal. If no hooves or only one hoof appears, veterinary assistance might be required. Once the foal has been delivered, remove the placenta and any debris from the face and nostrils to allow normal breathing. The umbilical cord will break, leaving the umbilical stump. Apply iodine to the umbilical stump after bleeding stops. The foal should be standing and nursing within two hours. If the foal has not taken in any colostrum within two hours, begin supplementation of the mare's colostrum. I prefer to milk some colostrum from the mare into a cup, then pour it into a syringe because I can control the volume, and it is not necessary that the foal have a strong suckling reflex if you feed the foal with a syringe instead of a bottle.

Continue to monitor the mare. Complications such as vulvar, vaginal or cervical tears, uterine prolapse, uterine rupture, internal hemorrhage and retained placenta could occur. Monitoring the placenta or "afterbirth" from the mare's vulva is important because it can be problematic if it remains in the uterus for too long. I recommend contacting your veterinarian if the placenta has not passed within three hours. If the placenta isn't expelled or removed within a matter of hours, the mare's reproductive capability can be affected, and metritis and/or laminitis might develop, which can be life threatening. If the placenta is long and being stepped on or tangled in the tail, tie it up into a knot or into a bag to hang free from the vulva. Once the placenta has passed, it should be kept in a bucket to be evaluated by your veterinarian at the time of the mare and foal exam.

Jekyll and Hyde

Remember that a sweet, gentle mare can turn into an exceedingly protective mother in a very short period of time. A few words of caution: don't get involved in the birth process unless necessary, stay calm and quiet, minimize lights, and use common sense. If you must enter the stall, don't turn your back on the mare. Be constantly aware of the mare when you are around her foal. If you check the vulva or placenta, the mare might swing her rear around very quickly or kick. Don't try to handle the foal without someone holding the mare, and have two assistants available to help the veterinarian during initial exams.

Check Immunity

Have your veterinarian draw blood to check for immune status via a test for immunoglobulin G (IgG) levels, normally within 12 to 24 hours. Because all foals get their immunity through the mare's colostrum in the first 24 hours, there is no way to know how well your foal is protected without this IgG test. If the foal has a low immune status, called "failure of passive transfer," then treatment or supplementation can be given.

Remember to feed your mare properly – especially through late pregnancy, parturition and lactation.

Dr. Banner reminds you to establish a strong relationship with your veterinarian so that help will be only a phone call away.