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Foaling Facts

When is my mare likely to foal?

Mares can deliver healthy foals from 320 days pregnancy to 380 days. This means your mare may foal over 12 months from when she conceived! The average gestation length is 334 days. There are many factors which affect the length of pregnancy; For instance, ponies tend to have shorter pregnancies than thoroughbreds and colt foals are carried an average of two and a half days longer than fillies. Foals born before 320 days are considered premature. These foals are immature in development and are unlikely to survive.

Where should my mare foal?

Ideally mares should foal inside so if any complications occur around foaling she can be examined in a safe environment. A large straw box free from draughts where the mare has plenty of room to lie down is ideal. If your mare is going away from home to foal then it is best to move her 4-6 weeks before her expected date to ensure she has built up plenty of protection from infection at her new stable prior to foaling.

Signs and stages of foaling

Up to a few weeks prior to foaling the mare's udder will develop (Known as 'bagging up'). Within a few days of foaling drips of fluid may form as wax on the tips of the teats. This is called 'waxing-up'. The ligaments of the hindquarters around the tail head tend to soften closer to foaling. Many mares show no signs that foaling is imminent, so it is important to monitor them closely around their due date even if they do not look ready to foal.

Mares can foal at any time of the day but the most common time is between 11 pm at night and 4 am in the morning. The foaling process is rapid. It is important to make regular checks on mares during the night when they are due to foal even if CCTV or foaling alarms are used. Foaling alarms can be rented per week. (See http://www.wyke-equine.co.uk/foaling_alarm.htm) Observing the foaling with minimal disturbance to the mare is essential. There are 3 stages of labour:

Stage 1 labour lasts minutes to hours

The mare starts to feel warm (some sweat) and may turn to look at her flanks. She may become restless and start to paw at the ground. She will get up and down a few times before lying down to foal. She will then start to strain.

Stage 2 labour – Expulsion of the foal – lasts approximately 20 minutes

Stage 2 starts with the mare beginning to strain until the foal is expelled. It is important not to disturb the mare at this stage so that she remains on her side. The placenta starts to show at the vulva and then the foal's feet (usually one foot in front of the other). The foal's head then appears followed by the chest and belly. At this stage the foal's hindlegs will remain inside the mare when a large quantity of essential blood will be transferred from the mare to the foal via the umbilical cord. The foal should start to paddle with its front feet and move its head to tear the bag of placenta covering its face. If there is no movement after 1-2 minutes then the bag should be torn.

If the mare foals standing up then the foal should be held at the height of the vulva until the umbilical cord has stopped pulsating. Premature rupture of the placenta will prevent the foal receiving a major proportion of its blood volume.

Stage 3 labour – Expulsion of the placenta – within 6 hours of foaling

Once the foal has been born, it will usually stand up within 90 minutes. The mare will probably rise first and break the umbilical cord. Failure to expel all of the placenta and membranes within 6 hours of foaling can lead to toxic infection which may in turn lead to a sudden onset severe laminitis. If you are not certain that ALL of the placenta and membranes have been passed by three hours post foaling, you should ring us straight away so we can take steps to make sure they are all out within 6 hours of foaling.

Naturally the mare will nuzzle, call and lick the foal. This is the start of a very firm bond. Your mare may be very good to handle usually but be aware that her foal is the most important thing to her. She may become anxious and protective of the foal so take care on entering the stable. Foals become very agile very quickly so do not take their cute looks for granted – they can still kick out and catch you unawares!

What should I look for in the first 24 hours?

The mare

- The afterbirth has been passed within 3 hours. (We recommend you save it in a bucket of water so it can be checked by the vet).
- The mare is allowing the foal to feed.
- The mare is eating and drinking, passing urine and faeces.
- There is no obvious bleeding from her back end or tears in her vulva.

The foal

- The foal has consumed plenty of colostrum within 6-12 hours of birth.
- The foal is feeding frequently and sleeping in between.
- The first droppings (meconium) have been passed (dark brown in colour). Some foals (especially colts) can become constipated and this may lead to serious infection.
- Urine has been passed.
- The umbilicus is not leaking fluid.

The importance of colostrum

Foals are born with an immature immune system as they have been protected from disease whilst in the mare's uterus. It takes 6-8 weeks for their own immune system to develop to protect them from everyday 'bugs'. Colostrum produced by the mare is the first milk. It is full of antibodies and energy. The foal can only absorb these antibodies across its intestine in the first 12-24 hours of life. Foals which fail to obtain at least 250ml of colostrum in the first 6-12 hours of life are likely to have unsatisfactory immunity leaving them wide open to infection. Many of these foals die in the first few weeks of life.

The foal may not receive its requirement of antibodies if:

1. the mare drips colostrum from the udder prior to foaling
2. the mare fails to produce enough colostrum – more likely in maiden mares
3. the foal fails to suck quickly or frequently after foaling.

If there is any doubt whatsoever that the foal has received enough colostrum, we recommend a blood sample at around 24 hours old which gives a rapid result to confirm that the foal's level of immunity is satisfactory.

Checklist prior to foaling

- Ensure your mare has received a booster vaccination against tetanus 4-6 weeks before she is due to foal.
- Check what your insurance company will or will not cover in relation to foaling.
- If a Caslick's operation (Stitching of the mare's vulva) has been performed, contact the vet to reverse the procedure prior to foaling.
- Have your vet contact number ready
- Have the following ready for use if required:
 - Feeding bottle and teat – lambing teats are the most useful (bottle and teat available from the practice at)
 - Umbilical dressing – 0.5% Hibitane or iodine (available from the practice)

If things aren't going to plan...

Phone the vet if:

- **The mare has lost any colostrum/milk from the udder before foaling**
- **The foal is born prior to 320 days pregnancy**
- **The mare is in Stage 2 labour (Continuous straining) for more than 20 minutes without any sign of a foal**
- **Either the mare or the foal cannot stand after foaling**
- **There is excessive bleeding from the mare**
- **The mare fails to expel the afterbirth (placenta) within 3 hours**
- **The foal fails to suck within 90 minutes of birth**
- **You are not certain that the foal has received enough colostrum within 6 hours of birth (This is likely to be the case if you do not know what time the foal was born)**
- **If you are unsure about anything**

We recommend a check over of all foals within 24 hours of birth to check for any congenital defects such as heart murmur or cleft palate and an examination of the mare to ensure she is not damaged after foaling.

We have a 24 hour emergency service and we are available to attend foalings at any time, even if everything seems to have gone to plan, to check the mare and foal for piece of mind.