

Focus on Foaling

The expected birth of a foal from a favourite mare is an exciting but worrying time for most horse owners. It is particularly important to know what is 'normal' both in terms of the foaling process and how to expect the foal to behave once born.



Fig 1. Newborn foal

How should I prepare my mare for foaling?

Mares should be vaccinated against influenza and tetanus one month prior to foaling to boost colostrum antibody levels and helping to protect the foal against infection during its first few weeks of life. If your mare is to foal away from home, she should be moved four to six weeks prior to foaling so that she can develop specific antibodies to potential infections in her new environment.

Mares should be foaled where they can be discretely observed and help can be easily given if required. This usually means in a stable, although mares can be foaled outside if the weather is good. The bed should be of deep straw or rubber; shavings are a nuisance as they stick to the birth fluids and foal. The stable should be well lit and a first aid kit containing scissors, hibiscrub, string, and towels should be on hand.

Signs of Foaling

Foals are born after 11 months gestation (*Thoroughbred breeders work on an average gestation length of 340 days to calculate 'due dates'.*) Some

mares foal earlier and some later, but foals don't usually survive if born before 250-300 days. Most mares foal during the night but this cannot be relied upon and full term mares should be watched very closely to make sure that they do not get into difficulty.

In the weeks leading up to foaling the mare will start producing milk resulting in gradual enlargement of her udder known as 'bagging-up'. During the last few days small amounts of colostrum may ooze from her teats, creating wax-like droplets which stick to the tip of the teats, so called 'waxing up' (Fig 2). It is a sign that foaling is imminent, although individual mares can vary enormously in their timing.



Fig 2. A 'waxed-up' mares udder

The ligaments over the pelvis and under the tail head relax slightly giving a 'dropped' appearance to the hindquarters. During the 24 hours prior to foaling the mare may appear restless and uncomfortable and may re-arrange bedding as if 'nest making'. These are signs of first stage labour.

The key to good foaling care is to observe without interfering unnecessarily. CCTV can be very helpful but should not be relied upon and foaling 'alarms' which detect sweating or prolonged lying down are also available. Individual mares behave very differently however, and cameras, monitors and milk tests cannot be relied upon. There is no real substitute for 'sitting up'.

What is First Stage Labour?

During first-stage labour the foal positions itself in the pelvis and the mare's cervix relaxes, the mare may look restless, getting up and down with signs of abdominal discomfort. She will raise and lower her tail and produce frequent small quantities of droppings and urine.

Most mares sweat but some don't. This stage may last for several minutes to several hours and ends when the 'water breaks', i.e. the placenta ruptures, this can be differentiated from urination because the mare does not adopt the urinating stance and the volume of fluid is too large. Help should be sought if the mare is excessively distressed or is in prolonged, non-productive discomfort. If the placenta does not rupture, it may appear at the vulva as a red velvety structure. This is a 'red bag' delivery and is a sign that the normal site of rupture is too thick and the mare is detaching her placenta to expel the foal. (Fig. 3)



Fig 3. The 'velvety' appearance of red bag

If this happens oxygen will not be able to pass across the placenta from the mare's blood to the foal. It is important to tear through the 'red bag' placenta immediately or the foal may suffocate.

THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!

What is Second Stage Labour?

As soon as the first water bag ruptures, you should carefully and gently examine your mare, with a clean hand, to make sure that the foal's nose and two front feet are appearing at the vulva covered by a thin white membrane. The feet are just ahead of the muzzle and one foot should be just ahead of the other. If the head or one or both legs are back, or if more than two feet are present, or if only the foal's neck or back can be felt, you should call for veterinary assistance immediately. If you need to help the mare, pull one leg at a time when the mare strains.

With the foal in the normal position foaling should progress rapidly. The mare will usually lie on her side to push and the foal should be delivered within a few minutes. The hindlegs may remain in the birth canal until the mare moves or the foal starts to struggle (Fig 1). The umbilical cord should rupture naturally just below the navel. There should be minimal bleeding unless the cord has