

THE NEWBORN FOAL

If your favorite mare is about to produce her first foal, the event you've been anticipating with so much excitement may suddenly become rather frightening. What if something goes wrong? You can relax in the knowledge that Mother Nature looks after most mares and their newborn foals extremely well. Still, just in case, it helps to know what is normal and what to expect from a newborn foal.

Newborn foals are particularly susceptible to the traumas of birth and if something does go wrong, their condition can deteriorate quickly. It is important that abnormalities are detected early on so that action can be taken quickly.

The normal new born foal

As with most things there is a range of 'normality', but basically you should expect the following behavior from a new born foal:

1. The foal should be born front legs and head first, with its muzzle clear of the placenta so that it can breathe for the first time as soon as it is born. It should be obvious from the movements of its nostrils and chest that it is breathing.
2. The foal's eyes should be open and bright.
3. Immediately after birth, the membranes of the foal's mouth and tongue may look quite a dark pink color because of the normal pressures of the process of birth but the membranes should return to a normal light pink colour, relatively quickly, once a normal breathing pattern has been established.
4. Immediately after birth, the newborn foal's respiratory rate is rather high (60 breaths/per minute) and a foal's heart rate, which can be measured by putting a hand on its chest just behind the elbow, should be in the range of 80 – 100/beats per minute.



Mare smelling newborn foal

5. Once the foal starts to recover from the stress of the birth process and take an instinctive interest in its surroundings, it should make attempts to rest on its chest. This usually happens within a few minutes of being born. This aids respiration and indicates that the foal basically knows which way is up. It will make several attempts to stand before it is successful. It is important that the floor of the stable is well covered with bedding as injuries to the skin of the hocks can easily occur during this stage. Most normal foals will stand within 1 hour of being born.

6. Once standing with some confidence and stability, the foal will start curling its tongue and should start to make attempts to suck from just about anything that stands in its way. This might include the mare's elbows, nose, legs, the stable walls and you if you're in the way. This behavior just indicates that the foal is instinctively seeking out the udder. Most foals are sucking from the mare by 2 hours after birth and a veterinarian should be called if a foal has not had a good suck of milk by 4 hours of age.



Newborn foal standing for the first time

Apart from udder seeking behavior, foals of this early age are not terribly inquisitive about their surroundings. Having discovered the udder, they tend to go back for frequent small feeds and are quickly able to stand up and lie down again for a rest or sleep. The mare's teats should appear permanently wet or shiny, showing that the foal has been sucking, and the foal should lay down and sleep after sucking, showing that it has been satisfied. The foal quickly establishes a rhythm of frequent feeding and sleeping. In a normal foal, any disturbance will quickly make it jump to its feet if it's lying down. Over the next 12 - 24 hours the foal will become increasingly interested in its surroundings and will have bonded closely with the mare so that it will call her if she is not in immediate sight and will follow her if she moves or is moved from one place to another. The foal should appear bright and alert and will develop periods of play by prancing and chasing around the mare between periods of feeding and sleeping. If all is well with mare and foal, there is no reason why, weather permitting, they should not be turned out together in a small paddock even at this very young age.



Foal suckling colostrum

What might go wrong?

The birth process and the first few hours of life are a very complex time as the foal makes the transition from life in the womb to life in the outside world. Some foals appear to be just slow to adapt to their surroundings and suck (maladjustment or "dummy" foals). They appear to be in a stupor and get worse with time. The process of birth itself may be traumatic or the foal may be born with abnormalities.

“Dummy” foals are caused by damage to the brain due to lack of oxygen, can occur in even the most apparently normal births and can result in a foal which does not develop a suck reflex or is totally unaware of it’s surroundings. This is an emergency and a veterinarian should be called immediately. In advanced cases, the foal may just walk aimlessly around the stall, or in severe cases the foal may even start to convulse and make a noise like a barking dog. If the foal has developed an infection during the later stages of pregnancy, it may be born infected (septicemic) and too weak or ill to be able to function normally. In any of these incidences, or if there is any other reason that you do not feel that the foal is progressing as quickly as you think it should, your veterinarian should be called without delay.

What is the importance of colostrum?

The first milk produced by a mare is thick, often yellowish in color and honey-like in consistency. It is rich in antibodies against infection and is known as colostrum. Foals are naturally born without any antibodies of their own and until they ingest colostrum they are incapable of fighting infection. If the foal does not suck within the first 4 hours of life, it is necessary to call your veterinarian and ask him to administer the mare’s colostrum by stomach tube. If a foal has a good suck reflex but is unable to stand, it is possible to bottle feed the foal with the colostrum, which has been stripped from the mare. Where a mare has ‘run milk’ prior to foaling, the colostrum may be lost. In these cases it is necessary to give the foal donor colostrum from another mare or another source of equine antibodies. You should speak to your veterinarian, before the foal’s birth if your mare has lost any amount of milk prior to foaling. It is important that colostrum is given within the first 12 hours of life because after this time the antibodies are just broken down by the foals digestive system, like any other food stuff, and are not absorbed into the bloodstream. If a foal has already reached this age before being diagnosed as deficient, the antibodies must be given by intravenous infusion.

What should I do if something doesn’t seem right?

If at any time you are worried that your foal is not progressing normally, you should call your veterinarian without delay. A newborn foal can deteriorate very rapidly and the sooner help is obtained, the better the chances of your foal surviving and thriving. Do not adopt a ‘wait and see’ attitude as a little bit of experienced help might go a long way towards ensuring you have a healthy foal and mare at the end of the day.



Colostrum administered by stomach tube