

Foaling!

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Spring has sprung and the foals are hitting the ground on a regular basis. While most deliveries will go off without a hitch, every so often mares will have difficulty delivering their foal. Being able to detect when there is a problem during a delivery is very important because the longer the delivery, the poorer the chances of a successful outcome. Due to the nature of the placental attachment in horses, the blood supply (and therefore oxygen) becomes tenuous during the delivery process, and it is crucial for the foal to begin breathing on its own as soon as possible. Additionally, if the delivery process has run afoul, prompt assessment and treatment by a veterinarian can save the life of the foal and/or mare, as well as reduce the potential for damage to the mare.

Mares are notorious for foaling late at night when no one is around; it is important to know what to look for in a mare in which parturition is impending so that the birth can be observed. Most mares will begin to develop an udder within 4-6 weeks of foaling, with much enlargement occurring within the last 2 weeks of gestation. Many mares will leak a small amount of colostrum in the final days of gestation, which can form wax-like droplets on the ends of the teats ('waxing up'). There are a few kits on the market that may help to predict the foaling day based on changes in milk composition. Additionally, various foaling monitors are available that will alert you when the mare is in labor. Although not perfect, they may help you to decide when to get some sleep and when to grab the sleeping bag for a camp out in the barn.

When a mare is in the first stage of labor, she will usually show some signs of discomfort as the initial contractions start. She may have reduced appetite, sweat a little bit, pace, shift weight on her hind legs, or look at her sides. Some of these more mild signs of discomfort may be noticeable for a day or two before the second stage of labor starts. As this first stage progresses, some mares will roll a few times which may help to properly position the fetus.

Hopefully you will be able to attend the birth of your new foal. Here are a few things to look for in a 'normal' delivery:

Time: The foal should be fully expelled from the mare's uterus within 20-30 minutes of the mare's water breaking. During this time there should be a steady progression of labor. If 10 minutes go by without any progression in labor, there may be a problem. Also, the amniotic sac should be visible (white bag containing the foal) within 5 minutes of the water breaking.

Amniotic Sac: During active stage 2 labor, the amniotic sac should become visible and eventually break due to pressure from the contractions which press the fetus against the inside of this membrane. In rare instances, the placenta itself may become prematurely separated from the uterus during the delivery process

and become apparent as a deep red colored membrane. This is a true emergency as the foal is still reliant upon the mare for oxygen via the placenta at this time-- the oxygen supply is disrupted during a “Red Bag” delivery.



Front feet: The front feet should be the first part of the foal seen coming from the mare. These are closely followed by the head. Also, the front limbs should be oriented so that the sole of the hooves are facing downwards. There are a variety of malpositions possible (head first, hind limbs first, one leg bent back, etc.), so it is important to recognize what the proper position is so that help can be instituted if the foal is improperly positioned.

Comfort: It is not uncommon for some mares to show some discomfort after foaling, and mares that foal here in the clinic are often treated with a dose of Banamine. However, mares should not roll and thrash about after foaling, and such behavior may indicate serious damage (such as a tear in the uterus, uterine artery rupture, tearing of the birth canal).

Hopefully, the delivery of the foal has gone off without a hitch. However, the mare's work is not yet done, as she needs to pass the placenta (stage 3 of labor). The placenta should come out within 3-4 hours of delivery. It should be set aside for the veterinarian to inspect at a post-foaling check to make sure that it is intact. If the placenta has not passed by 3 hours post foaling, or if you notice that a piece seems to be missing from a placenta, the veterinarian should be contacted straight away. A whole or partial placenta left inside the mare can cause disastrous consequences (such as infection, toxemia, laminitis) and should be treated as an emergency.



If problems are noted before, during, or after delivery, a prompt call to your veterinarian is in order. Sometimes they may be able to walk you through the situation over the phone, but many times a troubled delivery will require your veterinarian's direct assistance. The veterinarian will quickly assess the situation and determine if it can be handled in the field or if it will require resources available at a surgical facility. However, often times it is best to just transport the mare to a surgical facility straight away and avoid spending additional time in the field. If the dystocia cannot be resolved in the field (which is often times the case) then precious time has been lost. Having a trailer lined up ahead of time will save time as well. Remember- time is of the essence and quick action can make all the difference in the world to a newborn foal.