

North Star Veterinary Services Newsletter

May 2019

The Foaling Mare and Newborn

As foaling season approaches, I'd like to review the various stages of labor and care of the mare and foal in the days surrounding the event. I'd also like to review when to intervene and when to call the veterinarian.

Foaling:

Environment:

Mares tend to foal at night, and they prefer to be alone. They have some control over when they will foal, and despite your many frequent visits to the barn, she may have the foal soon after you step away. An ideal situation would be setting up a camera in the stall so you can watch from afar and leave her in peace and quiet. As for the environment she is to foal in, it should be clean and dry. If she is foaling in a stall, it should be no smaller than 14x14 feet and the bedding should preferably be wheat straw, vs shavings. Straw will not stick to the coat of the wet foal like shavings, and there is a lower risk of corneal ulcers in the newborn foal from shavings getting in their eyes. Manure should be cleaned right away after foaling, to keep the environment as clean as possible for the foal. If more than one mare is to foal in the same stall, it must be disinfected between mares.

Counting down to the event:

Mares give a few clues that foaling is approaching. The udder fills with milk 2-4 weeks prior to foaling. The muscles of the vulva and croup relax, and the tailhead becomes more prominent. It is common to see edema of the hind legs and under the belly in the weeks prior to foaling ("stocking up").

The teats become engorged 4-6 days prior to foaling. Waxing of the teats occurs 1-4 days prior to foaling (colostrum, a yellowish, honey-like substance may appear at the teat end).

If a mare has had a caslick's procedure, it should be opened up **2-4 weeks prior** to her due date.

Stage one

In stage one, the mare becomes anxious and restless. She may appear colicky, kick at her belly, look at her sides, and frequently lie down and get up. She may also frequently raise her tail and urinate. This stage should not last more than an hour or two. If it does, your mare may in fact be colicking, so contact us if she behaves this way for more than 2 hours without progressing into the next stage of labor. When you observe this stage of labor, wrap the mare's tail with a clean wrap (make sure it's not too tight or left on for more than the labor event) and wash the mare's vulva with a mild soap and water. The sac the foal is in may become visible at the vulva. When the sac breaks, this is the end of stage one of labor.

Stage two

Stage two is delivery of the foal. Normal presentation of a foal for delivery resembles a diving position, with the head and front legs coming first, with hooves pointing down. If the hooves point up, the foal may be upside down or backwards. If you suspect this, or think the foal is not positioned right, seek veterinary help. In very rare instances, you will see a red sac coming first, instead of the normal whitish sac. **This is an emergency.** This is called a red bag delivery. This is premature rupture of the placenta from the uterus, which means the foal no longer has a blood supply and will suffocate. The sac must be cut and the foal delivered as soon as you notice it. If you wait for us to get there to pull the foal, it will be too late.

All of stage two should last no longer than 30 minutes. If it does, call us. Even if she does not seem to be progressing after 10-15 minutes after the membranes rupture, call us.

Stage three

Stage three is passage of the placenta. The mare may become crampy as she passes the placenta, but this should be temporary. If a mare has not passed her placenta after **3 hours**, it is considered an **emergency**, and veterinary help should be sought right away. A retained placenta will lead to massive infection and severe laminitis if not addressed quickly and aggressively. If the mare does pass the placenta normally, lay it out and look for missing pieces. It should be shaped more or less like a Y. If you suspect that it has torn and there is a piece left inside, seek veterinary attention.

When contacting North Star call 518-483-6223

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Postpartum care for the mare and foal

After the foal has entered the world, check for breathing. The foal should be making attempts to rise within about 30 minutes of being born. The umbilical cord should be disinfected with diluted chlorhexadine solution (which can be obtained from us) soon after it breaks, and for several days afterward. If the umbilical cord does not break on its own after birth, wait and see if it breaks when the mare or foal stand up. If it still doesn't break on its own, **do not cut it**. Take it in both hands, one on each side of the intended break point, and twist and pull it apart. This will stimulate the blood vessels to contract and control excessive bleeding. A good spot to break it is about 2 inches from the belly.

The foal should be making attempts to nurse about 1-2 hours after birth. If the foal has not nursed in 3 hours after being born, veterinary help should be sought. The foal needs to get colostrum within 8-12 hours of being born in order to have an adequate immune system. If necessary, you may have to milk the mare and feed the foal colostrum with a syringe.

We can check to see if a foal received adequate colostrum 8-24 hours after birth with the use of a foal-side SNAP test to look for IgG levels. If levels are not adequate, the foal should be given more colostrum or a plasma transfusion, depending on how old it is. If the foal is more than 24 hours old, it can no longer absorb colostrum, and it should be given a plasma transfusion to provide it with adequate antibodies.

A few other things

Keep an eye on the mare's appetite and manure output a few days after foaling. They are at increased risk of bowel displacement during this time.

Many foals are born with weak legs. Don't worry too much if the foal is down in the pastern and fetlocks for the first few days of life, as they will generally straighten up. But if you see any extreme limb deviations, seek veterinary help.

Unless it is a dire emergency **do not pull the foal** during delivery. A few exceptions include a red bag delivery or a backwards foal. If you do have to pull, **never** pull with any more force than your own strength. Any more force may cause severe damage to the mare and foal. If you are having trouble, never hesitate to call us.

It may be handy to keep our number (518-483-6223) and a stopwatch nearby if you are lucky enough to witness the foaling event. When we are anxious, time gets distorted, and it's hard to know how much time has passed and when to intervene or call the vet without a clock handy.

Foaling season is an exciting time, and we wish everyone safe and uncomplicated deliveries. But if problems arise, we hope you don't hesitate to contact us so we can work together toward a positive outcome!

Information in this newsletter was obtained in part from the American Association Of Equine Practitioners at www.aaep.org.

Update on services offered by our staff:

- General wellness / sick exams
- 24/7 Emergency Services
- Annual Vaccinations
- Coggins Testing / Charting
- Routine Dental Care
- Breeding ultrasound and A.I. services
- Pregnancy checks

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