

So You're Going to Have a Foal

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IF YOU'RE NEW TO THE BIRTHING PROCESS.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY LEANNE DAYON

Although the labor and delivery of a foal is generally uneventful, it is important to recognize the difference between what is normal and what could be a potential problem.

PREPARATION FOR FOALING

An ideal foaling stall should be 12 feet by 12 feet. The stall should be clean and fully disinfected, reserved only for foaling and isolated from transient or traveling horses. Contrary to many beliefs, a mare does not need to foal in a heated barn to have a healthy foal. A clean, dry stall that is free of drafts is sufficient. Straw is the preferred bedding for a foaling mare rather than wood chips or shavings.

Write down your veterinarian's phone number well in advance of the anticipated foaling date and keep it by all phones. Also have the breeding date readily available. If there are any complications, your vet will probably ask for the breeding date since there are so many opinions on how to calculate an anticipated foaling date. The anticipated foaling date is not only calculated by the breeding date; the age of the mare and time of the year also affect the foaling date. Older mares may carry their foals longer and mares due late in the season will also carry their foals longer. The average is 335–342 days. Anything prior to 320 days is considered premature and at high risk for a number of problems.

Have a clock or watch handy so you can keep track of each stage of labor. When anxious or under pressure, sometimes your perception of time becomes distorted.

Wrap your mare's tail with a clean self-adhesive wrap (i.e. Vetrap). This will not only keep the tail clean, it will allow closer observation, both in person or via closed-circuit TV.

THE DAYS BEFORE BIRTH

There to four weeks prior to foaling, the mare's udder begins to significantly enlarge. This will continue to progress until she foals. Two to three weeks prior to foaling, the mare's abdomen "drops," which is caused by relaxation of the abdominal muscle. Approximately a week to 10 days prior to foaling the muscles around the top of the tail start to soften. When this happens, the tail appears raised.

As the mare gets closer to foaling, she will get a waxy sub-



stance on her teats, which is an accumulation of thick, whitish secretion. This usually occurs anywhere from two or three hours to two or three days before giving birth. Some mares do not wax at all, so if this happens, do not be alarmed. If the mare starts dripping milk, she will probably foal within 24 hours. If the mare continues to drip milk for more than 12–24 hours, a significant amount of colostrum may be lost and a plan to obtain frozen colostrum should be in place. A simple blood test (IgG) from the foal is done to assure adequate passive transfer. If the IgG is low, the foal will need a plasma transfusion.

THE FOALING PROCESS

The delivery process is divided into three stages of labor. The first stage is parturition. The mare will become uneasy and appear to be very nervous as uterine contractions start. She may lie down and get up and walk the stall and appear to have mild colic. It is common to note tail swishing, pawing, looking back at her flank and urinating frequently. You may witness this behavior for two to three hours or off and on up to two to three days. Mares still have some control over the foaling process at this time and distractions may cause her to postpone delivery for quite some time.

The fetus will actually position itself for delivery. The foal begins by lying on its back with the forelegs folded over its chest. In the first stage of labor, the foal extends its forelegs and head, appearing to reach for the birth canal. Further uterine contractions cause a gradual rotation and the head and forelegs enter the birth canal. Continuous contractions force the placenta through the cervix, looking somewhat like a small balloon. Expulsion of 2–5 gallons of fluid, often referred to as breaking water, ends the first phase.

As contractions continue, the front feet are forced one ahead of the other into the pelvis, followed by the nose. At this point, make sure the feet are pointed downward and that you are seeing the front feet and not the back feet. If the foal is not positioned correctly, manual intervention may have to take place. If you are not experienced in repositioning a foal, the best thing is to call your vet for assistance. Malpresentations are very serious and the lives of both the mare and foal depend on a quick resolution. While waiting for your vet, walking the mare will help keep her from