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In the second of our breeding series equine veterinary nurses, **Lucy Holmes** and **Catherine Luke**, from Minster Equine Veterinary Clinic, York, explain about foaling and care of the young foal.

A guide to caring for young foals

As the foaling season is fast approaching, there are many questions a first-time breeder wants to ask. This article should help put your mind at rest by giving you a guide on what a healthy 'normal' foal should be doing and when to call the vet.

Giving birth

Your mare will usually lie down once she is ready to give birth and, after some strong contractions, the amniotic sac (a transparent bluish-white membrane) will quickly become visible.

Foaling usually occurs at night and can take between 15 minutes and one hour (it should not exceed one hour).

Soon after birth the foal will start sitting up in sternal recumbency (on its chest).

The foal will quickly start to try and stand – the mare encourages this by licking and nudging the foal. They normally stand within one to two hours.

It is important the foal should nurse from the mare within three hours as it needs to get the vital colostrum (first milk) in order to fight any infection. The foal's ability to absorb the anti-

bodies from colostrum declines rapidly after 12 hours.

The placenta (afterbirth) will be passed within one to two hours. It is important to check it is passed intact as the mare can become seriously ill if any of the placenta is retained.

The foal should pass urine and meconium (first droppings which are dark green, brown or black in colour and can be very firm) within 12 hours.

Tips for suckling

Interference with the above steps must be kept to a minimum to avoid disrupting the bond between the mare and foal. Sometimes a gentle 'push in the right direction' for a foal is all it needs to start suckling.

If further help is needed you may need to direct the foal to the udder and gently scratch the top of its rump which mimics the nuzzling of its mother. A gentle pull down of your thumb on the teat while cupping it with your hand will release some milk which you can guide into the foal's mouth (ensure someone is holding the mare when you do this).

Your foal should be bright, aware of its surroundings and

When to call the vet

- Straining to foal with no progress
- Retained placenta – not passed within three hours
- No milk from teats
- Foal not sucking and/or not standing within three hours
- Foal not passed faeces within 12 hours or has diarrhoea
- Foal showing colic signs
- Mare showing colic signs before or after foaling

have a close contact with its mother at all times.

It is advisable to have a vet check over your mare and foal within 24 hours of birth.

Feeding the foal

Initially, the foal relies entirely on the mare for all of its nutritional needs. You therefore need to make sure she is on a high protein diet (stud nuts/stud mix and a good quality hay or haylage). It is advisable to monitor her weight visually, and adjust the feed accordingly.

The foal will start to nibble at the mare's feed (concentrate and hay) around 10-21 days but it can be as early as a week. When the foal reaches eight-12 weeks you should consider feeding it a young stock concentrate which is high in protein, vitamins and minerals

Foal management

Exercise in the form of turnout is important for the development of the musculoskeletal system and the interaction with other mares and foals helps their social development. The paddock should be fenced with post and rail as this is the safest for the foal; just make sure your lowest rail is low enough to keep the foal in.

A foal slip (head collar, ideally leather) should be placed on the foal in the first week of life, and checked daily as foals grow quickly. Ideally foals should be handled daily and taught how to be led.

Worming the foal

Foals can be wormed from one month of age – ask your vet practice for guidance. Good pasture management is a must, picking



Catherine Luke and Lucy Holmes from Minster Equine Clinic.

up droppings daily, and worm egg counts from the mare and foal are advisable every three months.

Vaccination

Your mare should have all of her vaccinations up to date and a vaccination a month before parturition will ensure good levels of antibodies in the colostrum. If the mare has not been vaccinated for tetanus then the foal should receive an immediate acting tetanus antitoxin soon after birth and begin vaccinations at three months. Influenza vaccines should not be started until six to nine months of age.

Creating a plan with your vet for correctly vaccinating your pregnant mare and then the foal once it arrives, is the best way to ensure cover and put your mind at rest.

Footcare

Your foal should have its feet trimmed by a farrier every six to eight weeks. This gets the foal used to the farrier, which will result in a more co-operative youngster. The farrier, in some cases, can also correct minor limb deviations (after being checked by a vet).

Dental care

Your foal will be born with no

visible teeth; these will begin to erupt from the gums at around two weeks. You need to check to see if the incisors on the upper jaw and the lower jaw meet correctly. Some foals are born with a lower jaw which is too big or too small, causing the incisors not to meet. This may cause problems when the foal is eating hay (a vet check is needed if you see this problem). Your foal should not need their teeth rasping until around a year old unless you see a problem.

Weaning the foal

This can be done between four and seven months but around six is average, depending on the mare and situation. The foal must be able to support itself without the need for the mare's milk.

Introduce concentrate feed at least two months prior to weaning. Levels of concentrate may need to be increased once weaned, but this depends on how much the foal is suckling at the time of weaning.

If your foal is growing too quickly, the concentrated feed needs to be reduced or stopped altogether. Several orthopaedic conditions are thought to be related to rapid growth rate and inadequate minerals in the diet.



Exercise in the form of turnout is important for musculoskeletal development and interaction with other horses helps social development.



Foals normally stand within one to two hours of being born.