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What to Expect When Your Mare Is Expecting

Gestation length:

Mares stay pregnant for an average of 340 days. The first day should be counted as the day of ovulation or the last day of breeding (if the ovulation date is unknown). It is not unusual for a mare to give birth anywhere between 320 days and 360 days. Normal mares may stay pregnant for over a year. If a mare has been pregnant for more than 1 year, there might be a problem, but it is more likely that the breeding dates are incorrect. Mares should be monitored closely after 300 days for signs of readiness. Throughout pregnancy, check your mare daily for premature udder development or vulvar discharge. (These signs may indicate a problem).

Preparation/vaccination/deworming:

Mares should be moved to a dry lot (off pastures contaminated with fescue grass) and fed non-fescue hay 60 days prior to foaling date. If no such paddock is available, pasture grass should be cut short (the toxic endophyte lives in the grass seed head).

****Please refer to the vaccination/deworming document on the website for detailed information regarding vaccination/deworming of pregnant mares and young foals.****

Signs of impending birth:

Look for the development of an udder in your mare to determine how close she is to giving birth. Generally, the udder develops 2 weeks before parturition. Within 48 hours of birth, a drop of colostrum/milk may be seen on the tips of the teats ("waxing"). As the mare gets close to foaling, the muscles in the tail, buttocks, and vaginal area get soft and loose. A mare's milk can be tested to determine how "close" she is. Milk calcium rises drastically 24 hours before foaling. We recommend using the Foal Watch™ test kit (<http://www.chemetrics.com/visprods/foalwatch.htm>) to monitor milk calcium levels. Mares that drip too much milk before foaling are at risk of losing their colostrum. Call your veterinarian if you are concerned about your mare.

Several commercial devices are available to alert an owner when the mare is foaling. Foalert™, a device that is sewn into the vulvar lips, is a popular system (www.foalert.com). Many people use video and audio monitors to observe their mares. Of course, nothing works better than old fashioned round-the-clock monitoring. Remember to be very quiet and disturb the mare as little as possible. Most mares foal between 10 pm and 4 am.

Stages of labor:

In the first stage of labor, the mare appears restless. She may walk the fence, get up and down, or act slightly colicky. This stage of labor can last for a few minutes or up to several days. Mares can sometimes “hold it” until night or until you are not watching (stay quiet). In the second stage of labor, the mare will usually lie down and a large volume of water rushes out of the vulva. If you want the delivery of your foal attended by a veterinarian, please call as soon as the “water breaks.” (If all goes well, the foal will already be out by the time the doctor arrives; but if things are not progressing, he/she will be only minutes away). Next the foal will start coming. You should see two feet and a muzzle exiting the vulva within a thin white sac. If instead, you see a large bright red thick sac, this is a “red bag delivery.” You should cut this red sac open immediately, help deliver the foal if you can, and call the vet to examine the foal. Sometimes, the head and front feet will come out of the vulva and then go back in (This is OK. The foal doesn’t need to start breathing until after the chest is out.) The foal should be born within 20 minutes of the water breaking. If it is taking longer, or if the mare has been straining for 10 minutes with no progress, get the mare up, walk her, and call the veterinarian. Sometimes, mares will pause and rest after the foal’s chest is out. After the foal is on the ground, the mare will often lie with just the back feet of the foal still inside her. The foal should appear vigorous and be attempting to move or crawl. Eventually, the mare will rise and the umbilical cord will break. After 10-15 minutes, if the cord has not broken yet, you can grab the cord with a gloved hand and yank firmly down from the foal’s belly. It should break in the right spot. Sometimes, the cord will bleed for several minutes. As soon as the cord breaks (before the navel stump touches anything), you should dip the navel in iodine (but DO NOT TOUCH navel with bare hands!) While the foal is still lying down, administer a Fleet enema. This will help the foal pass the meconium (first bowel movement). The mare will lick the foal, and the foal will attempt to stand by the 1st hour after being born. During this time, the mare is in the third stage of labor, the passing of the placenta. She should pass the placenta within 2 hours after giving birth. You should tie up the hanging pieces of placenta in a knot or with bailing twine so the mare does not step on it, but do not attempt to pull the membranes out! If some of the hanging placenta has torn off, tie a plastic grocery bag with some wet towels to the remainder to give it some weight. Save the placenta for the veterinarian to examine or call the veterinarian if the placenta has not passed after 3 hours.

The new foal:

The foal should be vigorous and responsive when born, should be able to stand after 1 hour and nurse by 2 hours. It is very important that the foal nurses the colostrum (or first milk) from the mare in order to obtain vital antibodies and nutrients. The foal should urinate frequently, especially after nursing. Between 8 and 12 hours after birth, the veterinarian should be called out to perform a new foal exam. It is important to have this examination to check for abnormalities/injuries, examine the placenta, and test the foal’s blood to see if it absorbed enough antibodies (IgG) from the colostrum. The foal’s umbilicus should be dipped in iodine immediately after birth and again one hour after birth.