

What to expect when your mare is expecting

Congratulations – your mare is in foal!

Firstly it is important to know a rough due date. The average gestation for a horse is 340 days, although they often range from 335-345 days.

Note: your foal may appear up to one month earlier or two months later this date and still be considered a normal birth. You may hear of this referred to as the 320 day 'safe zone'.

Vaccinations

Equine Herpes Virus (EHV) can cause abortions in late pregnancy, and can spread to other pregnant mares. For this reason we recommend mares are vaccinated against EHV 1&4, with vaccines given at 5, 7 & 9 months of pregnancy.

Equine Influenza - We recommend giving your mare a booster vaccination during the last 3 months of pregnancy to maximise the immunity passed on to the foal in the colostrum (first milk) - this can be done alongside the final EHV vaccine.

Tetanus immunity is poorly transferred from the mare to the foal. This is why we routinely give the new born foal an injection against tetanus at the post-foaling check.

Worming

We strongly recommend worm counts and appropriate worming are maintained throughout pregnancy as some worm larvae can be passed from the mare to the foal through nursing. It is prudent to worm the mare approximately 4 weeks prior to her estimated foaling date. Equest and Equest Pramox are safe for pregnant mares.

Farriery

Keeping your mare's feet in good condition is just as important when she is in foal as it is if she were in regular work. Many people have their broodmares unshod but they should be trimmed regularly.

Feeding

It is important to maintain your mare at a healthy weight before, during and after pregnancy, in order for her to be able to give birth and care for the foal effectively.

For the most part, horses do not need additional feed during pregnancy. However, the nutritional requirement of the mare during late pregnancy and throughout lactation is increased. Fortunately Mother Nature has timed the spring grass growth to coincide with this change and feeding is not always necessary. If, however, your mare appears to be losing weight in late pregnancy then additional feed may be needed. Commercial 'stud' diets specifically for pregnant mares are ideal.

It is also important to keep up to date with dental care when your mare is in foal.

General health

You should check your mare daily to ensure she is bright, happy, eating, drinking, and passing normal urine and droppings. Any illness or injury can put extra stress on her body, which can in turn affect her pregnancy and the development of the foal.

Particular attention should be given to her udder – firstly because premature udder development (more than 6 weeks before her due date) can be an indicator of a problem with the placenta, and should be reported to us immediately so we can check the mare for any abnormalities. Secondly, because udder development near her due date can indicate she may be getting ready to foal.

If you have any concerns or questions about managing your in-foal mare, please do not hesitate to give us a call.

Foaling

We strongly recommend that clients who don't have a lot of experience with foaling do some reading or attend a course so they are familiar with what should happen and what to look out for.

While it can be very exciting to have your mare foal at home, it can also mean a lot of stress and sleepless nights! Some people prefer to send their mare away to foal under the watchful eye of an experienced team who can step in if necessary to assist.

Preparing for foaling

The ideal foaling box is large, clean and easy to keep an eye on from outside. A clean, deep bed of good quality straw is ideal for foaling down as it is hygienic and not too dusty for the new born foal.

Many mares help us to guess when they might foal by showing some pre-emptive signs such as udder development ('bagging up'), relaxation of the ligaments around the tail head and 'waxing up' of the teats. Every mare is different and may show all, some or none of these signs close to foaling.

There are also milk testing kits such as 'FoalWatch' or a simple pH test strip available to help further estimate when a mare will foal.

What you need

- Tail bandage
- Mare's headcollar and lead rope
- Hibiscrub
- Small, clean pot for navel dip
- Clean bucket for placenta
- Clean towels
- Pair of round-ended scissors
- Fully charged phone, with our number saved
- If possible, a sensible and willing helper!

We know that foaling can be very exciting and that there will be lots of people looking forward to welcoming your new little friend into the world BUT mares do not like an audience for giving birth (who can blame them!) and if anything goes wrong and you need a vet, it is easiest if we don't have lots and lots of people around. One or two calm adults to help out is plenty. Children, friends and any other visitors can wait until your foal is up, drinking and bonded with mum – they're usually dry, fluffy, running about and even cuter by the next day!

Stages of labour

Stage 1 – 1-2 hours

In this stage the foal gets into position for foaling. The mare can show mild colic signs such as restlessness, getting up and down, patchy sweat and looking at the flanks. This is completely normal and may last only a few minutes or up to an hour or so.

Mares appear to be able to suspend this stage of labour if they are disturbed, so they are best watched quietly and not fussed over. We suggest settling in with a cup of tea, and if you are at all worried, give us a call to let us know that foaling has started.

At this stage it can be helpful to wrap the tail in a bandage if you can do so safely, and without upsetting the mare.

Stage 2 – 20-30 minutes

This stage starts with the waters breaking and involves strong abdominal contractions to push the foal out.

The waters breaking should be accompanied by the appearance of a thin, whitish membrane at the vulva.

If a red membrane appears instead, this is an **emergency** and you **must call us** right away so we can talk you through helping the mare and foal.



Normal delivery



Abnormal 'red bag' delivery

If possible try and make a note of what time your mare's water breaks, or start a timer so you know how long she has been in Stage 2 for. In the excitement it is easy to lose track of time.

Foals should be born front feet first, with their head extended and nose following the feet. Many mares will lie on their side, some get up and down a couple of times.

If the foal is not presented correctly or if this stage takes longer than expected, call us for assistance.

Stage 3 – up to 3 hours

This stage involves the expulsion of the placenta. It is very important that the placenta is passed intact within 3 hours of foaling. Do not be tempted to pull the placenta, it should be allowed to pass naturally.

Where possible, please try and keep it safe in a clean bucket once it has been passed so we can examine it at the post foaling check. If the placenta has not been passed within 3 hours, give us a call as this can be potentially very dangerous for the mare.

The newborn foal

Try and resist the temptation to help the foal to its feet, they will often scramble about a bit while finding their feet and may get up and fall over several times.

A foal should stand by itself within ONE HOUR and start to suckle within TWO HOURS.

Again, try and resist the temptation to help the foal latch on and suckle as this is an important part of the mare bonding with the foal. Sometimes you may need to hold the mare still and talk to her calmly to get her to accept the foal's attempts to suckle.

If your foal is not trying to get up within 20 minutes of foaling, or if they have not suckled within 2 hours, call us for help.

Usually, the foal will break the umbilical cord as it gets up – it should never be cut with scissors or a scalpel. It is important to dip the navel with very dilute chlorhexidine (Hibiscrub) soon after the foal stands in order to prevent contamination and infection. Use a clean, gloved hand to do this and ideally repeat several hours later. A small, clean pot filled to the brim makes this easier.

Post-foaling check

We strongly recommend that your new born foal is checked soon after foaling to diagnose any problems early. This is best performed between 18 and 36 hours after foaling.

At this time we will:

- Assess the foal's general health
- Ask questions about the foal's behaviour
- Check for any birth defects or deformities
- Inject immediate tetanus protection
- Take a blood sample from the foal for IgG
- Check the mare
- Check the placenta

IgG testing

IgG testing can prove life-saving for some foals.

IgG (immunoglobulin G) is an antibody that is passed from the mare to the foal in the colostrum (first milk).

This gives the foal immunity against all kinds of infections from the environment and gives them their first line of defence against getting ill. Without it, foals can get very sick, very fast.

If this passage is insufficient then we may need to supplement the foal with extra IgG via an intravenous plasma transfusion.

Caring for your foal

Once the exciting/stressful part is out of the way, you can enjoy getting to know your new addition!

Most foals are fairly robust and, as long as they are cared for correctly, are happy healthy little creatures who love to run around the field with their mum and receive bum and neck scratches from their favourite humans!

It is important however to remember they are only babies and, as such, can be susceptible to sudden illness. For this reason it is extremely important that foals are checked on several times a day, and any change in behaviour is noticed and reported to a vet immediately.

Worrying signs that we want to know about ASAP include (but are not limited to):

- Lethargy, being extra sleepy or not wanting to stand
- Loss of appetite for milk
- Loss of affinity for mum – wandering off
- 'Daft' behaviour like circling, bumping into walls, stamping or chewing the air
- Swollen joints or navel, with or without lameness

This is by no means an exhaustive list, so if you have any concerns at all, just give us a call.

Last but not least...

Congratulations on your new foal!

We look forward to seeing them grow up into a strong, healthy youngster.

As they grow up, your foal will need worming, vaccinating, a passport and microchip, and possibly castrating!

For help and advice deciding when and how is best to do all these things, call the office.

Remember it is never too early to start getting a foal used to being handled, and a well handled youngster makes our lives much easier (and safer!) in the unfortunate event that they do become unwell or hurt themselves. Wrestling a completely unhandled baby makes it very difficult for us to treat them effectively and can put some horses off vets for life, which is the last thing we want!



Good luck from all of us!

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