

GUIDE TO FOALING YOUR MARE



Breeding from your mare is both an exciting and an anxious time. Most mares, even maiden mares, will foal without difficulty or any need for intervention, resulting in the birth of a healthy foal. Foaling is however a very critical and stressful time for both mares and foals, so it is important that you are able to plan for your foaling well in advance and recognise the start of foaling and the different stages involved during the birthing process. Difficult foalings are uncommon, but if problems do occur then the outcome can be bad, therefore it is essential that you are able to identify what is abnormal and be able to deal with any problems as quickly as possible.

When is my mare due to foal?

Mares can give birth to healthy foals from 315 (ponies and small breeds) to 380 (donkeys and larger mares) days of pregnancy so do not worry if your mare takes over 12 months from conception to foal. The average gestation length is 335-340 days but many factors can influence the length of pregnancy.

Most mares will foal between 11 pm and 6am so it is important to make regular checks on your mare during the night and to observe her quietly without disturbing her. CCTV and foaling alarms are often used at this time.

Where should my mare foal?

Ideally a large, safe, warm, draught free straw stable should be available where the mare has plenty of room to lie down and foal. The 'foaling box' should ideally be approx. 4m x 4m for a 500kg mare with access to clean fresh water at all times. It is best to acclimatise the mare to the box at least 4-6 weeks prior to foaling – this is important if she is going elsewhere to foal and allows her to build up immunity to her environment.

Signs that my mare is close to foaling

Most mares usually follow a pattern so if they foaled early last year then it is most likely that you can expect a similar early foaling this year. Hormonal changes in the last few weeks of pregnancy start to bring about some physical changes in the mare. These are the following:

- Relaxation of the muscles either side of the tail head. A hollow will develop each side. This can be quite subtle and hard to see, especially in well-muscled mares.
- Increase in udder size, roughly in the 3-6 weeks prior to foaling with most increase in udder size occurring in the last two weeks of the pregnancy.
- Some mares will 'wax up' (beads of dry colostrum at the teat openings) a few days before foaling with a large colostrum filled udder 24-48 hours before foaling. This colostrum contains all the essential antibodies for the foal's immune system to form.
- There may possibly be 'running 'of milk' – if this appears to be excessive then it can be collected and frozen.
- Relaxation of the tail base and relaxation and elongation of the vulva – sign that foaling is imminent.
- NB: Do note that many mares (especially maiden mares) show no signs that they are about to foal so close monitoring is essential as their due date approaches.



Photograph highlighting the increase in udder size.



Photograph showing waxing up of the mare's teats.





Photographs showing relaxation of the mare's tail base and vulva.



Stages of foaling

There are 3 stages of foaling (or parturition)



Stage 1

The mare becomes restless as uterine contractions start to develop. It is very similar to mild colic like symptoms and can last minutes to several hours.

- Heart rate and respiration rate will increase
- Flank watching
- Temperature will increase and she may sweat
- Restlessness and pawing at the ground
- Getting up and down several times before she lies down and starts to strain

Stage 2

This is the fast and 'explosive' stage of the labour process (<20minutes).

The mare starts to strain due to the increase in uterine tone with contractions until the foal is born. The start of this stage is characterised by the passing of straw/brown coloured watery allantoic fluid more commonly known as the 'water breaking'.

Generally most mares will lie down at this stage but they can get up and down several times during this. Strong abdominal contractions are noted during this stage – these are necessary to expel the foal.



Generally within five minutes of the waters breaking the inner set of membranes appear at the vulva (often a foot is observed within these). These membranes are a whitish colour

and the forelimbs of the foal should be present inside usually with one forelimb a few inches ahead of the other forelimb followed by the nose resting on top of the forelimbs (the diving position). The shoulders are the hardest part and the abdominal contractions will increase for these, then finally with a few more heavy contractions the hips are clear and the foal moves out of the mare usually to the level of its hocks.



As the foal is expelled the white membranes will burst and uncover the foal. If the white sack is still intact and covering the foal's head at this stage then tear it away from the nose and head – generally it tears during the birth process due to the foals very vigorous head movements.



This stage of labour from the mare's 'waters breaking' to the foal appearing on the ground should take approximately 20 -30 minutes.



IF A THICK RED MEMBRANE APPEARS AT THE VULVA (see picture below) INSTEAD OF MILKY WHITE MEMBRANES PLEASE SEEK VETERINARY ADVICE IMMEDIATELY AS THIS IS NOT NORMAL.



Once the foal has been expelled most mares will rest and relax at this stage quite often for up to 20 minutes – do not disturb her at this point. The umbilical cord will break when the mare gets up or when the foal starts moving and trying to stand. The umbilical stump should be treated with dilute chlorhexidine (hibiscrub) solution at this stage. **DO NOT CUT THE UMBILICAL CORD.**

At this stage the mare and foal should be left alone quietly to bond. A normal foal will have a strong suck reflex within 10-15 minutes of birth and will usually stand within one hour of foaling and be suckling within 2 hours. It is important that the foal suckles as soon as possible to ensure that the foal gets colostrum which contains all the essential antibodies.

The second stage of labour should only take approximately 20mins (less in many cases).

A VET MUST BE CALLED if the waters break and after 15 minutes either:

- Nothing has happened or a
- A red bag is present or
- The foal is not presented properly

Stage 3

Expulsion of the placenta – in most mares this will occur within 30-90 minutes of foaling and is usually complete within 3 hours of foaling.



There will be more obvious uterine contractions and mild discomfort (mild colic type symptoms) while the mare passes the placenta out through the birth canal. The placenta should be checked to ensure that it is complete and intact with only one tear present where the foal has come out

Photograph of an intact placenta that has been passed post



If you are unsure then keep the placenta in a cold area/bucket of cold water and call your vet to check it and to ensure that it has not torn and left any pieces inside the mare. This is known as retained foetal membranes and can be quite detrimental to the mare as it can lead to toxic infection and a sudden onset severe toxic laminitis.

If the mare has not passed the placenta within 5-6 hours it is advisable that you call your vet – **do not pull it or try to remove it** – simply tie it in a knot.

Overall it is useful to remember:

1 hour – foal standing

2 hours – foal suckling/nursing

3 hours – placenta passed





THE NEWBORN FOAL

- The foal should be kept warm and dry
- As soon as the umbilical cord has broken the stump should be dipped with a dilute chlorhexidine solution
- The foal should have a strong suck reflex within 5-10 minutes
- The foal will usually be attempting to stand within 20 minutes of birth and be standing within 1 hour
- The foal should have suckled from the mare within 2 hours of birth
- By 12 hours of birth the foal should be nursing strongly and bonded with the mare
- By 12 hours of birth the foal should have passed urine and faeces (MECONIUM) - the dark faeces
- Foals normally sleep and get up every 30mins to drink and urinate

If there is any variation on these or you are concerned i.e. the foal is trying to suckle but is unable to latch on properly, or the mare is not letting the foal nurse then call us immediately for advice or a visit as foals can deteriorate very quickly if problems are not dealt with.

Colostrum is the first milk produced by the mare. It contains antibodies and energy. Foals can only absorb colostral antibodies for the first 12 -24 hours and MUST have at least 250-300ml colostrum in the first 6 hours of life otherwise there is a failure of passive transfer of antibodies and these foals become very weak and often die without treatment.

The foal may not receive adequate colostral antibodies if

- The mare drips colostrum from the udder prior to foaling
- The foal does not suck quickly or frequently after foaling
- The mare does not produce enough colostrum – more common in maiden mares

If you have any concerns that that the foal has not received colostrum please contact us immediately as we can perform a simple blood test around 24 hours old to confirm that the immune status of the foal is satisfactory.

Ideally we recommend a routine Mare and Foal check of all mares and foals within 24hours of birth.

The foal will be checked over for any congenital defects such as cleft palate and we strongly recommend checking the IgG levels of the foal via a simple blood test to check that it has had sufficient colostrum so that any problems can be dealt with immediately.

The mare will also be checked over – the placenta will be examined, her vulva will be checked to ensure there are no tears and a general physical examination will be carried out.

WHEN TO CALL THE VET

- If the foal is premature (born before 320 days of pregnancy)
- The mare has lost colostrum/milk from the udder before she foals
- The mare is in stage 2 labour for over 20 minutes with no sign of a foal
- There is excessive bleeding from the mare
- The mare or foal cannot stand within expected time frames after foaling
- The foal fails to suckle within 90 minutes of birth
- The mare does not expel the afterbirth within 6 hours
- If you are not sure if the foal has received enough colostrum within 6 hours of birth
- **IF YOU ARE UNSURE OF ANYTHING OR HAVE ANY CONCERNS**

THE FIRST 24 HOURS

The mare

- The afterbirth has been passed within 3 hours and definitely by 6
- The mare is allowing the foal to feed
- The mare is eating, drinking, passing urine and faeces
- There is no bleeding from the mares back end or obvious vulval tears

The foal

- The foal has consumed enough colostrum within 6 hours of birth
- The foal is feeding frequently
- The meconium (first droppings) have been passed, this is dark brown in colour.
- Urine has been passed
- The umbilicus is not leaking fluid

BEING PREPARED - CHECKLIST PRIOR TO FOALING

- Make sure your mare is up to date with vaccinations and worming
- If your mare has a Caslick's suture in her vulva, contact your vet to reverse this before foaling
- HAVE THE PRACTICE CONTACT NUMBER READY – 01420 (or inform Kings Bounty of your mare's expected foaling date)
- Have clean towels , tail bandage and umbilical disinfectant ready
- Feeding bottle and teats (lamb's bottles and teats are found to be the most useful)
- Check what your insurance company will or will not cover in relation to foaling
- Access to warm water