

Tacoma Equine Hospital

3112 – 156th Street E. Tacoma, WA 98446 ♦ 253.535.6999

Ah, Springtime

Ah, springtime is coming and so are the newborn foals. For those of you having experienced foaling out your own mare, you know both the joys and untimely sorrows this season can bring. When foaling goes well, it goes really well, but when it goes bad, it can bring disaster in short order. Knowing the parameters of a normal foaling and when to be concerned can help you avert these disasters.

Getting Ready: So you've been feeding this mare all the right food for eleven months and now it's time to prepare her for her big day. The average gestation length for a mare is 340 days, but many mares are not average. Many healthy foals have been delivered between 305 to 360 days. Foals born before day 300 generally do not survive. Approximately 2 – 3 weeks before her due date, she needs to be closely watched during the day and put in a foaling stall at night. This foaling stall should be at least 12 x 12 and immaculately clean, bedded deeply in straw. A full set of vaccines should be given to the mare including Influenza, Rhinopneumonitis, Encephalitis, Tetanus, Strangles, and Potomac Horse Fever. Also, she should be dewormed with an Ivermectin product. These things help ensure quality colostrum production so your foal gets a good head start in life. If your mare has had a Caslick's suture performed, now is the time to "un-suture" her.

Impending Parturition: Signs that the mare is getting ready to expel the fetus are varied, and time to parturition is not very predictable. Most mares foal between 11 PM and 4 AM and usually during the 30 minutes you decided to take a nap because "nothing was happening!" The mare's abdomen will enlarge of course and she will begin to develop an udder (unless she's a maiden). As the day nears, you may see some edema develop in front of the udder and the udder veins enlarge. She may drip milk. Within a few days to hours before birth this white milk will turn to sticky yellow. The yellow milk is colostrum. Dripping too much colostrum before the actual birth usually means an alternative source of colostrum must be found to give to your newborn. This yellow sticky milk may look like wax plugging up her teats. This "waxing" is also a sign of impending parturition. Between 7-10 days before birth, your mare's pelvic ligaments will start to relax, she will get mushy around her tail head and her vulva will relax and elongate.

The most reliable predictor of impending birth is changes in the electrolyte makeup of her milk. There are 3 tests on the market that measure these changes. They can predict within 24 to 72 hours when your mare is due to foal. It is best to start measuring these electrolytes 10 days before her due date so you're ready when she is.

Stage I: During this stage of labor, your mare will start acting "colicky". She'll sweat, look at her flank, kick at her belly and just generally be restless. Her uterus is beginning to contract and the foal is moving around, putting his feet and nose against the cervix, teasing it to dilate. This phase of labor can last anywhere from 1-4 hours and she should be left alone, but given close observation. When the "water breaks" this signals the end of Stage I.

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Stage II: This phase is when the fetus is actually delivered. The mare may be up and down, but generally will give birth lying down, although a standing birth is OK. The baby should be delivered within 20 minutes and if it takes longer there should be a normal progression of events through that time. If 10 minutes passes without any sign of the forelimbs or head at the vulva, veterinary assistance should be sought. The foal's feet should appear first, soles facing down. The foal's muzzle should be evident when the legs are out 5-7 inches. It should be resting on the foal's knees. Any deviation from this pattern means you should call your veterinarian immediately! When the foal is in the wrong position, the mare is having a dystocia and any delay in getting that foal out means it may suffocate.

The amnion is the fluid in which the foal was floating while in the uterus, and is still surrounding him in the birth canal. In a normal foaling, the movement of the legs should break the amniotic membrane as the foal is halfway out. If the foal's head is outside the mare without the membrane breaking, it should be opened and cleared from the nose. After the shoulders come through, the rest is easy for the mare. Allow the mare and baby to rest together and bond for up to an hour without intervention unless something looks amiss.

Stage III: This stage is merely the expulsion of the placenta. This needs to happen within 3 hours. Have your veterinarian examine the placenta to see if the mare has retained any part.

Examining the foal: A normal foal will sit sternal within 1-2 minutes, stand on it's own within one hour and nurse on it's own within 2 hours. Taking longer to nurse than 3-4 hours is definitely abnormal and a veterinarian's assistance should be sought to tube the foal with the mare's colostrum. Getting your veterinarian to examine the foal within the first 12 hours is a good idea even if all went well. They will get a blood sample to check that the foal received enough good colostrum, as well as give the newborn a general physical exam to try and identify any potential problems early. Administration of an enema may aid the foal with meconium passage (his first poop). Dipping the umbilicus in dilute Chlorhexidine 2-3 times daily is a big help to keep your foal from becoming sick.