

Tacoma Equine Hospital

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

Ready, Set, Here Comes the Foal

For those of you with pregnant mares, it is nearly time for your new foals to arrive! It is exciting, but may also be worrisome if you do not know what to expect. The following is a guide to what happens during normal foaling with hints about how to recognize when things are not progressing correctly. As always, if you have any concerns or questions, Tacoma Equine veterinarians are just a phone call away.

Getting Ready:

Four to six weeks prior to your mare's expected due date, she should receive a full set of vaccines to help ensure quality colostrum and she should be dewormed with Ivermectin. If your mare has had a Caslick's procedure, it is time to remove this. Two to three weeks before her due date, begin watching your mare closely and move her into her foaling stall at night. The stall should be a minimum of 14 feet by 14 feet, immaculately clean, and bedded deeply with straw. This is also a good time to put together a "Foaling Kit" to be kept near your mare's stall – ask Tacoma Equine for a list of items for the kit.

Signs That the Foal Will Arrive Soon:

The mare's normal gestation length is between 320 and 365 days, and mares typically foal right around day 340. Do not fret if your mare does not foal by the calculated "due date", as prolonged gestation usually means that the fetus is normal, but just not yet ready for the outside world.

Signs that the mare is getting ready to give birth are varied, and time to foaling is hard to predict. First, the mare will begin to develop an udder (often maiden mares will not). Between 7-10 days before birth, the mare's pelvic ligaments will start to relax, she will get mushy around her tail head, and her vulva will relax and elongate. As the day nears, you may see some swelling in front of the udder and the udder veins enlarge. She may drip some milk. Within a few days to hours before birth this white milk will turn to a sticky yellow, which is the colostrum ("first milk"). It may look like wax plugging up her teats, and so is referred to as "waxing".

The most reliable predictor of impending birth is a change in the electrolyte makeup of her milk. There are several milk test kits available that can predict within 24 to 72 hours when your mare is due to foal. Start checking the milk ten days before her due date so that you are ready when she is.

Most mares foal between 11p.m. and 4a.m., and it is thought that the mare has some degree of control over when she will give birth. It seems she will do her best to foal just when you turn your back!

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The Birthing Process:

Normal labor in the mare is divided into three stages.

Stage I: During this stage of labor, your mare may act “colicky” or just be generally restless. Her uterus is beginning to contract, the cervix is dilating, and the foal is moving into the birthing position with his feet and nose against the cervix. This phase of labor can last anywhere from 1-4 hours and she should be left alone, but observed closely. Some mares that are disturbed during stage one of foaling will delay the foaling process for hours or even days. When the “water breaks” this signals the end of Stage I.

What Could Go Wrong?

- *Mare starts to show signs of Stage I but never progresses.* If this happens, call your vet to make sure she is not actually colicking.

Stage II: This stage is the rapid expulsion of the foal into the outside world. Normal Stage II labor can be described as “explosive”—the time from when the water breaks to when the foal is on the ground should take no more than 30 minutes. Often the mare will lie down and get up several times throughout Stage II. Within a few minutes after water breakage the foal’s front feet should be visible at the lips of the vulva, facing downward. Soon after, the tip of the foal’s nose should be seen on top of the feet, as a normally positioned foal enters the world in a “diving” position. Once the foal is out, the mare will lie quietly for 10-15 minutes while the foal gets his bearings. Make sure the foal’s nostrils are clear by wiping with a towel, then leave them alone. The umbilical cord will break when the mare stands up; do NOT cut or tie the cord.

What Could Go Wrong?

- *A red, velvety “bag” appears at the mare’s vulva without the water breaking.* This means the placenta has prematurely separated from the uterus and the foal is no longer receiving oxygen from the mare’s body. You do not have time to wait for your vet; you must cut open the placenta immediately to allow the foal to breathe air or it will suffocate. Carefully cut the bag a small amount, then tear it open with your hands. Help the foal out and clear the airways.
- *The mare actively strains but no feet are visible within ten minutes of the water breaking, or the feet are present but soles are not facing downward.* The foal may be positioned incorrectly (dystocia) and need help being delivered. Your veterinarian should be called immediately.
- *The umbilical cord ruptures too quickly and there is a lot of blood coming from the foal.* Clamp or tie the cord with umbilical tape and call your vet for advice.

Stage III: This stage occurs when the mare passes the placenta (afterbirth). It usually takes between 20 minutes and 3 hours from when the foal is on the ground. The mare may show mild signs of colic as she tries to expel the placenta. If the placenta is hanging from her vulva, it may help to tie it up with twine, but do not try to pull it out of her. Once the placenta is out, save it in a bucket so that your vet can make sure it is complete.

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What Could Go Wrong?

- *The placenta does not pass within 3 hours.* A retained placenta or even a small piece of retained placenta can cause potentially life-threatening illness. Call your veterinarian to assess and treat the mare.
- *The mare shows severe signs of colic or loses interest in her foal.* This may indicate a serious complication such as a uterine tear, internal bleeding, or colon torsion, so call your vet to assess the situation.

Examining the foal:

A normal foal will sit up within a few minutes of birth, stand on his own within one hour, and nurse on his own within two hours. Taking more than three hours to nurse is abnormal and your veterinarian should be called to examine the foal and give him colostrum through a nasogastric tube.

The newborn's umbilicus should be dipped in dilute chlorhexidine solution 3 times daily for the first two days to help prevent infection. He should also receive a Fleet enema to aid the foal with passage of meconium, the tarry black first manure. If all went well, the foal should be seen by your vet within the first 12-24 hours of life. He will receive a physical exam to identify any potential problems, and a blood sample will be taken to check that the foal received enough colostrum to be protected from disease.

Remember, mares have been foaling in the wild for a long time. Ninety percent of births are perfectly normal and produce healthy, happy foals with absolutely no need for intervention. We are here to help if the need arises.