

The Newborn Foal



After eleven months of waiting, when your bundle of joy finally arrives; it is worth knowing some facts about the newborn foal, especially about the first few hours of life.

The mare and foal should be checked over by your vet soon after foaling to make sure all is well. This examination becomes more urgent if the foal is showing no signs of sucking, or if the mare has not passed the placenta (cleansed).



IT IS IMPORTANT TO OBSERVE THE FOAL SUCKLING THE MARE WITHIN SIX HOURS OF BIRTH

After birth, a foal should normally...

- sit up in 1-2 minutes;
- have a suck reflex in 2-10 minutes;
- stand within 2 hours (average 1 hour);
- suckle within 4 hours (average 2 hours);
- urinate by 8.5 hours and pass meconium within 4 hours;
- have a temperature of 37.2 to 38.6 C.

Optimising immunity in the foal:

- ensure the foal sucks good quality mare's colostrum within six hours of birth;
- ensure the mare is up to date with vaccinations and has been on the premises for at least one month prior to foaling;
- tetanus antitoxin given soon after birth can assist in protecting against tetanus;
- blood test to assess the foal's antibody level between 24 and 48 hours;
- plasma transfusion can boost low antibody levels.

KEY POINTS:

- treat the navel with oxytetracycline spray or iodine as soon as possible after birth;
- ensure the foal sucks good mare's colostrum in the first six hours;
- arrange a new foal check with your vet;
- allow the mare and foal undisturbed time to bond;
- check that the foal has passed all the meconium by 24 hours shown by the appearance of soft yellow milk dung;
- observe urination;
- monitor the foal and call the vet at the earliest sign of any problems.

Problems in newborn foals

The majority of foals are on their feet and trying out their legs in the paddock within hours of birth, but it must be remembered that they are much more vulnerable than an adult and require special care and monitoring.

- Newborn foals are particularly susceptible to extremes of temperature so should be protected from direct hot sun and cold wet conditions.
- Foals are born with very limited energy stores so need to suck soon after birth and at regular intervals (often every 20-30 minutes).
- Foals are born with a poorly developed immune system; they rely initially on antibodies from the mare's colostrum to help prevent disease. Therefore they should be kept in clean conditions, away from other horses and should suck good quality mare's colostrum as soon as possible after birth.
- There are major changes in the circulation and lungs that need to occur at birth for the foal to adapt to life outside the womb. Much of the maturing of the foal ready for birth takes place in the last few days so premature foals and those showing signs of prematurity (dysmature) are much more vulnerable and often have a poor survival rate.
- Developmental abnormalities can present problems in the newborn foal e.g. cleft palate leads to appearance of milk at the nostrils. Hernias can be seen as swelling in the navel area and in colt foals in the groin area.
- Septicaemia can result from infection before birth, at the time of birth or after birth. Good hygiene and colostrum can help prevent infection.
- Foals are particularly prone to joint infections via bacteria spread in the blood

stream. Any cases of lameness should be seen by your vet as a priority

- Meconium is the firm sticky droppings that are present in the gut at birth; these are normally passed within 12 hours of birth. Meconium impaction is not uncommon especially in colt foals and presents with unproductive straining and colic signs.
- Urine dribbling from the navel can occur if there is failure of closure of the urachus which connects the bladder to the umbilical cord.
- It is not uncommon for foals to be born with bent legs. This can be due to ligaments and tendons being too taut or slack or due to uneven growth across a bone. Most improve dramatically in the first two weeks.



MAJOR CHANGES OCCUR IN THE CIRCULATION AND LUNGS AT THE TIME OF BIRTH WHICH ALLOW THE FOAL TO ADAPT TO LIFE OUTSIDE THE WOMB



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