Foaling: What to Expect

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Foaling is an exciting time, you've waited 11 long months of your mare's pregnancy and you can look forward to a new baby around! And although no mare foals exactly like another, the proceedings of the birth follow a similar pattern. When you know what to expect from a normal birth, you are sure to be less distracted by insignificant details that may be a perfectly normal part of the foaling process. And you can be even more prepared with a Foaling Kit on hand.

Although the best case scenario would be if the veterinarian were there to help, sometimes you must be present at a foaling when waiting for the veterinarian, or maybe you just want to know what is happening while the veterinarian is there. This list will help you see how a normal foaling proceeds:

Signs of Impending Parturition (birth):

- Filling of the udder (two to six weeks).
- Distention of the teats (four to six days).
- Waxing of the teats (one to four days).
- Obvious dripping of milk (one to two days).
- Other signs include: Muscles around tail sag and vulva sags to almost twice its normal length.

Stage I

Breaking of water bag.

Length of time: 1 to 2 hours.

Signs mare has started contractions:

- May act colicky and paw the ground.
- She may sweat around her neck and flanks.
- Urinate frequently or pass small amounts of drippings.
- She may pace and snatch small bites of hay.
- She may lie down and get up frequently.
- The birth canal dilates and the water bag may become visible at the mare's vulva.
- When the bag breaks, there will be a rush of fluid (two to five gallons) and Stage I ends

Do NOT break the water bag.

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Stage II
Delivery of the foal.
Length of time: 15-20 minutes.

- If this stage goes past 30 minutes, OR if you observe a red, velvety sack during birth, CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN immediately.
- The mare may stand up, lie down, or roll to properly position the foal for delivery. Most mares lie down to deliver but if your mare stands and delivers her foal, you should try to catch the foal.
- The proper position of the foal during this stage resembles a diving position where the front legs will appear first with the foal's nose tucked between them. The foal's hooves should be positioned so that one hoof is slightly ahead of the other. If the soles are up, you should call your veterinarian immediately. A mare may rest with the foal half in and half out. If Stage II goes beyond 30 minutes, call your veterinarian.

Stage III
Begins after delivery of foal when the mare must expel placenta or afterbirth.
Length of time: Up to three hours.

- Most mares will pass the placenta within one to three hours after the foal has been delivered. If the placenta is not passed in three hours, call your veterinarian.
- A retained placenta is toxic to your mare in less than six hours.
- A mare will usually stand up after delivery and this is when the umbilical cord should break.

Attention: DO NOT cut the umbilical cord.

Foal Care
Monitor the following for at least the next 24 hours. Make sure:

- Foal is breathing normally.
- Foal is bright and alert. The foal should make attempts to stand within 30 minutes after delivery.
- Within about two hours of birth, the foal is standing and nursing. If this hasn't occurred within 3 hours of birth, call your veterinarian. The foal may need medical assistance.
- The foal nurses enough in the first 8 to 12 hours to absorb the antibodies of the mare's colostrum. If you are concerned that the foal is not getting enough of the mare's colostrum, call your veterinarian before the 12 hour mark.
- The foal passes the meconium (the first stool after birth) within 12 hours of birth. Many veterinarians may have you give the foal an enema to help clear the fetal stool from the rectum.

Mare Care
Make sure:

- The mare appears non-aggressive toward her foal and is curious and attentive to her foal.
- Mare is allowed to eat as soon as she is ready.
- A supply of clean, fresh water is provided.
- To examine the placenta to be sure it is intact once it has been expelled. It is Y-shaped and will include a hole through which the foal has passed. Put the placenta in a plastic bag.
- If through your examination of the placenta, it appears that it is not all there, then call your veterinarian immediately.

If your veterinarian is not present at the foaling, make sure she does a foal and mare exam within 24 to 36 hours of delivery.

You may want to have Foal Supplements (FoalLac) on hand so you and your veterinarian can formulate a feeding plan if the foal is not feeding normally.

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