

A BABY HORSE IS COMING

by Mr. Sam Hernandez

****What should you expect? What should you look out for?***

The normal gestation period of the horse is 320 to 365 days, with an average of 341 days. Knowing the signs of the approach of foaling is useful, but the signs are inconsistent from one horse to the next. Exact prediction of the foaling date is impossible.

Some signs to watch for are relaxation or softening of the sacrosciatic ligament, mammary gland development (which may begin 3 to 6 weeks prior to foaling), and the formation of colostrum (which usually occurs 2 to 3 days before foaling). "Waxing" of the teats occurs in about 95% of mares 6 to 48 hours prior to foaling. The honey colored "wax" falls off the teats and milk may begin to drip from one day to only hours prior to foaling.

****The three stages of labor****

Stage 1: Beginning contractions

This initial stage of labor lasts about one to two hours as mild uterine contractions move the foal through the cervix and into the birth canal. The mare may begin to sweat, look at her sides, paw the ground, and generally appear restless and uncomfortable. She may lie down and get up repeatedly. The udder will feel warm and may begin dripping milk. Her abdomen will have "dropped" in front of the pelvis making her appear more "flat-sided". The tail and vulva should be very relaxed.

Stage 2: Active labor

At the beginning of the second stage of labor the "water" will break. This is the rupture of the placental membrane, releasing amniotic fluid. Typically, the mare will then lie down and begin to have forceful uterine contractions that should deliver the foal within about 20 minutes. If delivery takes longer than 20 minutes, there may be a problem that requires immediate action. Be prepared to intervene or to call for help or both.

Stage 3: Expulsion of the placenta

Once the foal is born, the mare will begin to pass the fetal membranes (the placenta). The complete placenta should be passed within 3 to 6 hours. If the

placenta does not pass, call your veterinarian because a retained placenta can cause serious problems including uterine infection and/or secondary laminitis.

****In summary****

Obviously it is important to be ready to help your mare through delivery. Close observation of the mare and her physical and behavioral changes will indicate when she has entered Stage 1 (mild contractions). When she has started Stage 1, wrap her tail with a clean wrap and gently wash the vulva and hindquarters with mild soap. Be sure to rinse thoroughly and pat dry.

Remember, Stage 2 (active labor) begins when the mare's "water" breaks. The birth should follow quickly. Normal presentation of the foal is with one foot slightly ahead of the other and the soles of the feet pointing down. Next the nose appears, followed by the head, neck, shoulders, and finally the hindquarters. Any deviation from this sequence indicates a mal-positioning or dystocia. You must recognize a mal-positioned foal because the mare will need help delivering.

A mare will usually lie down to give birth, but some individuals will remain standing or repeatedly get up and down after the foal's feet have presented. Try to stay out of the mare's way and she will usually lie back down. If she insists on foaling while standing, you will want two people to assist her: one at her head to keep her still and one to assist with the foal.

If everything is progressing normally, you should not disturb the mare.

If you see constant forward progress of the foaling process, then you are OK. It is important not to rush a normal delivery and to let the mare go at her own pace. Once the foal's shoulders have been delivered, it is not unusual for the mare to take a short break. The foal should be breathing by the time the hind legs are out. If he isn't, it is important to be sure that his nostrils are cleared of any fluid or placental membranes. Rubbing the foal vigorously with clean dry towels will help stimulate respiration as well as warm the wet foal.

The umbilical cord should not be ruptured prematurely because it is supplying important oxygenated blood during and immediately after delivery. The foal will usually kick free and break the cord on its own at a site about an inch from the foal's abdomen. Once this has happened you should thoroughly apply navel antiseptic to the stump. It is very important to dip the navel stump a couple of times daily for several days with whichever antiseptic solution your veterinarian recommends.

Allowing both the mare and foal to rest and bond after delivery is desirable. If possible, leave them undisturbed until one or both stand (usually less than one

hour). If it is necessary to intervene, have someone with whom the mare is comfortable approach first (especially with a maiden or first time mare).

If the foal is lying quietly don't make it stand.

When the mare regains her feet the placental membranes should be tied in a large knot so the mare can't step on them. As the placenta is slowly delivered it may be necessary to retie the knot.

Do not pull the placenta out.

Once the placenta has completely passed, spread it out to be sure it is intact. It should be shaped like a "Y" and have just one hole in it through which the foal passed. Put it in a plastic bag or a bucket of water for your veterinarian to examine.

As long as the foal is safe let him work on getting up by himself. If more than two hours pass and the foal has not gotten up there may be a problem.

If they can't stand, they can't nurse.

In such cases a veterinarian should be called immediately to examine the foal.

Once standing normally the first thing the foal should do is begin to try to nurse. It is essential that a foal nurse within the first 2 to 4 hours so it begins to get an adequate supply of colostrum. Colostrum contains antibodies from the mare that help protect the foal from infection until the foal's immune system matures and produces them itself.

Within the foal's first 24 to 48 hours, your veterinarian should draw blood to look for possible failure of passive transfer of these protective antibodies from the colostrum.

The next task for the newborn foal is to pass the meconium. The meconium is the first sticky tar-like stool. It should pass within 12 hours after birth, usually sooner. Many veterinarians recommend giving all newborn foals an enema because meconium impaction is very serious and can cause colic or decreased nursing.

Recording the times that all these events occur provides valuable information for your veterinarian as well as a record for the owner which will help predict how an individual mare may behave during future foalings. There is a lot to learn even in an uncomplicated normal delivery.

****Complications in delivery****

In cases where the mare is having trouble foaling you must be ready to assist immediately.

If you see straining for more than 20 minutes without presentation of the foal you are in trouble.

You need to be ready to help the mare because if your veterinarian is 40 minutes or more away you will need to assist productively in order to reduce the chances of a dead foal or a damaged mare. If you recognize trouble call your veterinarian immediately and describe accurately what you see so you can receive instruction on what to do while the vet is traveling to you.

Foal mal-positions may include:

- 1) One or both front feet or legs deflected backwards
- 2) Head and neck tucked under pelvic brim
- 3) Head and neck deflected to one side
- 4) Foal upside down
- 5) Front legs above the foal's head
- 6) One or both of the hind feet positioned forward under the foal's abdomen or chest
- 7) Shoulder lock (in pelvis or birth canal – usually large foal)
- 8) Hip lock (in pelvis or birth canal)
- 9) Breech presentation – tail first or hind legs first
- 10) “Red bag” (premature separation of the placenta)
- 11) Uterine inertia (the uterus does not effectively contract)

****Be prepared****

Remember, Mother Nature has developed a fine system for the mare to deliver a healthy foal. But, as an owner there is no reason to remain unprepared. Be educated and attentive in order to help the mare and her newborn foal to get a successful start. Be prepared in advance. Read books. Watch videos. Talk to your veterinarian. No question is a stupid question – ask a lot of questions and you will be ready to enjoy the whole experience.