



**Breeding from your mare is both an exciting and anxious time. It is important that you are able to recognise the start of foaling (labour) and its different stages. You can then enjoy the experience, reassured that you know what to do if problems occur.**

### How long is pregnancy?

In horses the average pregnancy (gestation period) is 342 days (approximately 11 months) but can range between 321-365 days.

### How can I prepare for the birth?

#### Your mare

During pregnancy, your mare will require special attention. Ensure that her feet are trimmed regularly and do not allow her to become overweight - regular paddock exercise in late pregnancy is essential.

It is good practice for your mare to have booster vaccinations 1 month before foaling. This ensures that the first milk (colostrum) contains high levels of antibodies, protecting the foal against disease during the first weeks of life. It is extremely important that the foal receives the colostrum, therefore, if milk is seen dripping from the udder before foaling, collect it in a clean container and freeze it.

If your mare has foaled previously and her vulva had to be stitched, these stitches must be removed at least 2 weeks before the expected foaling date. It may be necessary for your vet to open the vulva surgically if it has been stitched excessively.

#### Where to foal

Move your mare to the foaling premises at least 6 weeks before she is due to foal.

Provide a clean, safe quiet environment, preferably a large box. Use clean straw bedding - it does not cling to the wet newborn foal.

Alternatively, although less ideal as the actual foaling may be missed, use a small clean grassy paddock. Make sure that fences are secure and that there are no ditches or wet areas.

#### Other things to remember

Keep your vet's emergency phone number to hand.

Have a watch, pen and paper to record accurately the time of each stage of labour - this information will be important if veterinary assistance is needed later. Have a bucket of clean, warm water and antiseptic soap ready. You will also need to bandage your mare's tail when the first stage of labour begins to keep the tail hairs out of the way.

### How will I know when my mare is starting to foal?

There are important clues which can alert you to the approach of foaling. However, some mares will only show a few of these signs and some will show none at all.

The first signs can appear several days and even weeks before the actual delivery:

- The udder begins to fill with milk up to 2-4 weeks before foaling, so watch for any signs of enlargement.
- Relaxation of the birth opening (vulva) and birth canal (pelvic canal/ligaments), making the mare's tail head appear more pronounced and the vulval lips longer, can occur a few days before foaling.
- Enlargement of the teats (nipples) occurs 4-6 days before foaling.
- A clear waxy secretion ('waxing') on the teats can appear 1-4 days before foaling, and occasionally dripping of milk will be seen.
- Your mare may be nervous and restless and show signs similar to that seen with mild colic.

Most mares foal either late at night or in the early hours of the morning, so be prepared for some sleepless nights!



### Does my vet need to be present?

It is advisable to ask your vet to examine your mare in the last few weeks of pregnancy. However, your vet only needs to be present during the foaling if problems occur (see later).

Foaling is a rapid process and difficulties arise quickly. It is essential that you can detect the signs of abnormality promptly. However, do not interfere excessively during the early stages of labour - watch quietly from a distance.

If you have no prior experience of foaling, ask a friend who has to help you, or consider sending your mare to a studfarm to foal.

### What happens during foaling?

Foaling is divided into 3 stages.

#### Stage 1 - labour begins

Womb contractions begin, and the birth canal opens ready for the foal to pass through. Signs you may observe are:

- Restlessness.
- Signs like colic, eg flank watching, pawing.
- Sweating.
- Frequent passage of small quantities of manure.

This stage can last about an hour. Do not disturb the mare during this time - have as few people present as possible. Stage 1 ends with the 'breaking of the waters' which then flow out of the vulva.

#### Stage 2 - the birth of the foal

This stage lasts about 30 minutes and is a very explosive event (if it takes longer, call your vet immediately).

The mare will lie down and have strong belly contractions that push the foal down the birth canal. The foal normally comes through the vulva in the following way:

- Front feet first, one slightly in front of the other, hooves facing down.
- Followed by the nose, head, neck, shoulders etc.
- The foal is usually delivered lying on its side, hind legs to the level of the hock inside the vagina, with the umbilical cord intact.
- If the foal is coming differently to this sequence, contact your vet immediately.

Do not intervene when the foal is delivered unless there is something wrong (see below).

The foal will be covered in the birth membranes (amnion) which often breaks at the moment of delivery and which the mare will lick and nibble off: this is an important bonding process between the mare and foal and also stimulates the foal to breathe, stand up and suck.

If the membrane is covering the foal's mouth and nose and the mare does not clean it away immediately, then remove it and clear the foal's nostrils and mouth of any mucus yourself so that it can breathe freely.

Watch carefully for normal breathing.

The umbilical cord attaching the foal to the mare usually breaks when the foal struggles to rise or the mare gets up. It is preferable for it to break naturally, so do not try to break it yourself, or disturb the mare so that it breaks early. The umbilical stump (the foal's navel) will need treating with a disinfectant, several times during the first 24 hours of life, to prevent infection. Ask your vet for an appropriate product to use.

#### Stage 3 - the afterbirth is expelled

This can last 1-2 hours, but usually occurs within 1 hour of foaling. If it has not been expelled within 3 hours consult your vet and tie up any membranes which are protruding from the vulva so that the mare does not step on them or tear them.

## Foaling - what you need to know



Keep the afterbirth (placental membranes) because it can provide your vet with valuable information about the birth. If some of the afterbirth is retained within the mare this can lead to serious post-foaling problems for her, eg laminitis and womb infections (metritis).

### What are the signs that something is wrong?

Foaling difficulties occur in only 4-6% of births. These can be life-threatening to the mare and foal and also can prevent the mare from having further successful pregnancies.

Signs to look for are:

- Prolonged Stage 1 or particularly Stage 2 labour. If either of these stages is prolonged by even a short amount of time, there is much less chance of having a healthy foal.
- Incorrect presentation of the foal.

### How do I care for the newborn foal?

Remember that foaling is a natural process and try to intervene as little as possible. This is especially important with maiden (first foaling) mares or nervous mares. Give the mare and foal time to rest and establish a strong maternal bond. If you must be with them, do not put yourself between the mare and foal.

The foal should stand within 1-2 hours and suckle 1-3 hours after birth. If the foal takes longer than this it may be a sign that something is wrong so contact your vet for advice.

The foal should urinate and pass its first faeces (meconium) during the first day. If the foal begins straining and switching its tail with no sign of manure, it may need veterinary assistance to enable the manure to be passed.

Your vet may recommend a physical examination to check for any deformities and a blood test to check that the foal has good levels of antibodies, on the day after birth.

### What follow-up care does my mare need?

Watch her carefully for any abnormal signs, eg colic, lack of interest in the foal, profuse bloody discharge from the vulva, appearance of manure at the vulval lips, inability or reluctance to stand. It is a good idea to take her temperature twice daily as any increase may be an early indication of infection (normal temperature is 99.5-100.5degreesF).

Provide your mare with good quality hay, hard feed and grass to encourage her milk production. Check her udder for signs of mastitis (heat, swelling, pain) or inadequate milk production (empty).

**If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.**