

# Foaling

*A mare foals about 11 months after breeding, usually needs no help, but time is critical if there is a problem*

## Overview

Foaling, also referred to as parturition, is the process of giving birth to a foal. Foaling occurs approximately 338 to 345 days from the last breeding date; however, this time period can range from 320 to 365 days or more. Gestation length varies based on season, breed, and other unidentified factors. While long gestation periods are not generally considered problematic, foals born prematurely (before 320 days) typically require aggressive medical care for survival.

## Pre-Foaling

By the estimated foaling date, the mare will have received her vaccinations, been dewormed, and will be resting comfortably in a properly secured and cleaned location. If the mare has had a Caslick's operation (i.e., stitches in the vulva to close off her reproductive tract to air and debris), the veterinarian will need to remove the stitches so they will not impede foaling or cause the mare to tear.

One major pre-foaling concern is leaking colostrum, the mare's first milk, which is essential for the foal's survival. Some dripping is not unexpected prior to foaling, but excessive dripping or running of colostrum will make collecting the colostrum in a clean container necessary. The owner should freeze colostrum to save it for the foal, warming (*not* via microwave) and administering it to the foal approximately six hours after birth. If the colostrum is lost, then the veterinarian or caretaker will need to administer an alternate source of antibodies (infection-fighting proteins) to the foal shortly after birth.

## Predicting Foaling

There are multiple methods available to predict foaling. Some of the more common include estimation of gestation length based on the last breeding date; testing calcium levels in mammary secretions using kits purchased from a veterinarian; and evalu-



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ating physical changes in the mare (e.g., dripping milk, waxing of the teats, relaxation of the external genitalia and tailhead, and filling of the udder and teats with milk (colostrum)). In addition, the owner can purchase various monitors that will alert an owner to the impending arrival of the foal. Monitors vary in complexity and price and can include video cameras mounted in the stall, halter or surcingle monitors that alert the owner or caretaker when the mare is lying down and ready to foal, and monitors that are attached to the vulva that alert the caretaker when the vulva opens, signaling that foaling is about to start.

## Foaling

Foaling commences with the onset of uterine contractions and is completed when the mare fully passes the afterbirth. The foaling process is divided into three stages described here.

**Stage 1** marks the beginning of labor and often lasts one to two hours. During this phase a mare is anxious, restless, and can appear colicky. She might kick at her abdomen, pace around the stall, sweat,

urinate frequently, and lie down and stand back up often. During this phase, the uterus is contracting to move the foal through the cervix into the birth canal. At the end of this phase, the fetal membranes might be visible at the mare's vulva.

**Stage 2** begins when the mare's "water breaks" (i.e., the amniotic sac ruptures, resulting in a gush of fluid from the vagina) and ends when the foal is fully expelled from the mare. This stage generally proceeds rapidly and is completed within 15 to 30 minutes. During the start of this phase, the mare might continue to change positions, stand up, and lie back down frequently, and she might even roll. All of these actions are aimed to properly position the foal for birth. The foal should be born in a diving position with the two front feet first (one slightly ahead of the other), followed by the head (nose first), shoulders, body, and hindquarters.

**Stage 3** is marked by the passing of the placenta. It is generally anticlimactic after the excitement of Stage 2, but Stage 3 is important nonetheless. The mare generally passes the placenta within one to

three hours of the foal's delivery. The mare should pass the entire placenta during this stage and a veterinarian should ensure that no pieces have been retained in the uterus. A retained placenta is a serious medical condition that can cause a massive infection of the uterus (metritis) and laminitis.

### Postpartum

The foal will begin to move within a few minutes of birth and will attempt to rise within 30 minutes. The foal nurses soon after standing, generally within 90 minutes of birth. It is imperative that the foal nurses within the first few hours of life to ingest and absorb his dam's colostrum, which has a high concentration of antibodies that protect him from infectious diseases.

The umbilical cord will require cleansing with an antiseptic several times during the first 24 to 48 hours of life. Ask your veterinarian for the appropriate product prior to foaling so that you have it ready when the foal is born. Finally, you should also note the passage of the meconium (the first black, tarry stools passed by the foal) and urine.

### When to Help

Mares generally prefer to foal in private, and the process typically proceeds smoothly and rapidly. The mare usually requires little to no help, and human interference can be disturbing for the mare and potentially dangerous for the person attempting to offer assistance. Common reasons for intervening in the foaling process are if the umbilical cord fails to break or if fetal membranes, bedding, or other debris is covering the newborn's nostrils. In these cases, you might need to break the umbilical cord near the foal's body where the cord is narrowest, and you can clear the nostrils using a clean cloth.

### When to Call Your Veterinarian

Unless there is a particular concern that has been identified pre-foaling, a veterinarian need not be present for the birth of the foal. That said, do not hesitate to call your veterinarian during foaling if:

- Stage 1 is markedly prolonged;
- Stage 2 is taking longer than 30 minutes;
- The foal is not properly positioned (e.g., the feet are coming out with the soles

## FAST FACTS

- Foaling is divided into three stages, and the entire process takes about four hours.
- **Stage 1** is characterized by the onset of uterine contractions to position the foal in the birth canal.
- **Stage 2** is comprised of the expulsion of the foal, which occurs very rapidly (between 15 and 30 minutes).
- **Stage 3** is marked by the passing of the placenta.
- Most foalings proceed uneventfully and human assistance/intervention is generally discouraged.
- Do not hesitate to contact your veterinarian with any concerns during foaling and to examine the foal within 12 and 24 hours of birth.

facing upward); and

- The foal does not stand to nurse within three to six hours of birth.

All foals should be examined by a veterinarian within 12 to 18 hours of parturition. During the examination, your veterinarian will assess all of the foal's body systems. He or she also will check for ribs that might have been fractured during the foaling process. 🐾