

Care of the New-born Foal

Foaling a mare at home can be a joyous experience if you are well prepared and are aware of what is normal. But what is normal?

Horses are a prey species and, so have adapted, from birth, to show very few outward signs of disease, helping them to cope with life surrounded by predators. This makes close monitoring of foals essential for the first 24 hours of their life, and early veterinary intervention very important, if there are any concerns.

Immediately after delivery

So as not to interfere with the mare-foal bond, intervention should be kept to an absolute minimum in the initial period after birth.

Immediately after delivery, if the mare is lying down, the foal's hind legs will often still be inside the mare for a few minutes.

When the mare or foal moves, the umbilical cord will naturally break at its weakest point. It should never be cut or clamped.

The piece of umbilical cord attached to the foal should be bathed in a 0.5% chlorhexidine/iodine and alcohol solution. This should be repeated for a few days until it is dry.

When should they first stand up?

If the mare is still lying down, the foal should be moved to her head for her to lick and bond with – at this stage the foal should be able to maintain itself on its chest.

The mare's licking will stimulate the foal to extend its front legs and, after many failed attempts, the foal will be able to stand. This is normally within two hours of being born.

When should they first suck?

Once they have got to their feet, foals are very quick to search for milk and normally feed within four hours of birth. Most foals have a strong suck response immediately after delivery, but it can take several attempts to find the udder and latch on to a teat properly.

Sometimes, they need some gentle guidance in the right direction, or the mare may need to be encouraged to stand still.



The foal's initial feeds contain the very important colostrum (if the mare hasn't been running milk prior to delivery) containing essential components for immunity.

It is vital that, if the foal has not fed in the first four hours of life, veterinary assistance is given – this may be by milking the mare and feeding the foal by stomach tube or giving artificial colostrum if the mare ran milk before the delivery.

The small intestine's ability to absorb the antibodies from the colostrum reduces with time so, it is important that the foal feeds within this short window.

If the new-born foal doesn't get enough antibodies from the mare through the colostrum, this could cause serious problems later.

If you are concerned about the foal's immunity levels, or think they didn't get enough colostrum, speak to your vet. It is possible to check via a blood test when they are over 12 hours old.

The foal will be given a tetanus anti-toxin injection which will give the foal cover for the first months of its life, this should then be followed by vaccination to ensure continued protection from this potentially fatal disease.

How often will the foal feed and pass faeces and urine?

Most foals will feed up to seven times an hour when they are awake and gain up to 2kg of weight daily in the foal's first week of life.

When foals first pass faeces it is called meconium and it is dark/black and very firm.

The faeces will become gradually softer as the foal continues to feed.

The most common cause of colic in newborn foals is when this material becomes impacted and it can't be passed easily. If the meconium has not been passed within eight hours of delivery, or if any colic signs are shown such as straining with no faeces being produced, you should call your vet straight away as the foal may need an enema.

Urination should also be seen within the first eight hours of life.



Normal Foal Behaviour

Most foals are inquisitive creatures and will be curious about the humans around. They will also interact with their mum freely.

An underdeveloped (also known as dummy or maladjusted) foal is a cause for concern – they often have a domed forehead, low body weight, are weak, have limb deformities, a silky coat and floppy ears.

If you are concerned about your foal and its interaction with people etc., you should contact your vet immediately to discuss the foal and its delivery.

The foal's first vet check

It's a good idea to have your new-born foal and its mother checked by your vet within 12-24 hours of birth.

This is to:

- Check that the mare has enough milk and that she has not been injured during delivery.
- Check the entire placenta has been passed (keep this in a bucket for us!)
- Do a full health check on the foal, including checking their eyes, heart, lungs, palate, umbilicus, ribs and to make sure they have passed their meconium.

Give us a call to help you make sure you know what to expect and, remember, we are always on the end of the phone if you have any concerns.