



FOALS

The first few weeks following birth are probably the most critical of a horse's life. A newborn foal is more susceptible to a range of diseases and injuries than older foals and adult horses; many of these problems are serious or potentially fatal. Great vigilance, together with seeking expert advice and taking prompt action, is essential.

Following birth the foal has to adapt to its new environment, breathing air and acquiring the means to stand, feed and to regulate its own temperature. From passing urine out of the body via the umbilical cord, it now has to seal off its bladder, store urine and then pass it out as in the adult animal. Foal faeces (meconium) which are black and putty-like, are passed within the first few hours, followed by yellow faeces as digested milk starts to appear.

The foal should rise usually within thirty minutes of birth. Weak or very gangly foals may need assistance, but is usually better to initially leave the mare and foal alone as this is an important period for mother and offspring to "bond". A quiet period is necessary to allow recovery from the traumas of birth and for the foal to gain its strength and co-ordination: remember it will never have had to balance before. One of the wonders of a young horse is the speed with which they acquire the ability to follow mum. This is an illustration of their natural habitat on the grassy plains, where they speedily have to follow the herd for reasons of safety, compared with the human infant who can stand only after many months and who could not keep up with adults for several years.

Once standing the foal should start to suck on the mare, usually at the nearest point. This is often around the shoulder region, the mare nuzzling the foal backwards and the foal following the contours of the mare's belly, hopefully to the mammary glands. This behaviour appears instinctively; most healthy foals rapidly learn to suck from their mothers with very little outside help. Problems occur if the foal is weak or if the mare has little milk or is uncooperative. Sometimes there is a particular problem with very tall warmblood foals where the mother has a particularly pendulous belly, effectively meaning that the foal has to dive underneath the belly to find the teats. Some mares are unfortunately vicious with newborn foals and here prompt action is essential to prevent disaster.

The first milk of a mare (colostrum) is rich in antibodies derived from mother, which when passed into the foal are absorbed into the blood stream and do much more to avoid early disease. Transfer of what is known as passive immunity takes place virtually entirely in the first 24 hours of life via the colostrum, the most critical period

being the first 12 hours. Apart from this vital protective function, milk is also of course highly nutritious, acts as a stimulant/laxative for the bowel to aid in the loss of meconium and the act of sucking encourages hormonal release in the mare that stimulates uterine contraction and the loss of the afterbirth. Prompt veterinary attention to assist with feeding problems is therefore essential.

Foals that strain excessively or show signs of colic (being off suck, rolling, looking at the flanks, "flagging" continuously with their tails) may have retained meconium or, more rarely, have some abnormality of the urinary system. Again prompt veterinary attention is important.

During the first few days/weeks of life one should adapt to a routine of watching the foals behaviour carefully. Look for signs of being off suck, respiratory difficulty and acute scouring. If in doubt check the foal's temperature. Up to 100.5 F is usually normal for a foal but anything higher than this should alert suspicion. Watch for signs of lameness and always take note of acute lameness. "Joint -ill" where a joint is infected via the bloodstream is relatively common in foals. Prompt treatment will often alleviate the condition completely, but if it is left even for more than a few hours and certainly more than a day or so, permanent damage may result. The vet will probably wish to "tap" or sample the joint fluid and x-ray the affected area; this should be done as speedily as possible to make an accurate diagnosis and institute treatment.

Foals are frequently born with "bent" legs. Excessively "bent" foals may have difficulty in standing and here assistance (hopefully short term) may be required to allow normal nursing. Advice should be sought, although thankfully the majority of conditions are benign, requiring minimal or no treatment. One should be careful however to differentiate here between the newborn foal and that of a few weeks old where side-to-side deviations of the major joints are occurring. Deformation of fetlock for example may require surgical correction very early on, within the first six weeks of life.

Many owners find it beneficial to have their newborn foals and mares checked by the vet on the first day of life. This gives an opportunity to discuss all these problems as well as carry out a detailed examination of dam and offspring. The mare is checked for signs of physical damage, haemorrhage and proper passage of the afterbirth. Always keep the afterbirth for the vet; much information can be derived which may indicate the health status of both mare and foal.

(Continued on page 2)

Many vets administer antibiotics and anti-tetanus serum at this time to the foal. This acts as a sensible physical preventative, particularly in cases where we may be unsure of a foal's health. It is also usual to take a blood sample from foals to check for the proper transfer of colostrally deprived passive immunity into the foal's blood stream. The timing of this sample must be after the first 12 hours of life (ideally after 24 hours) although we usually like to examine a foal earlier than this to make sure

other problems are not arising. Where transfer has been inadequate, a plasma transfusion is usually recommended to assist the foal's immunity,

Foals are wonderful things to have around; they are also a great responsibility and need careful watching, as they can become ill very quickly. Thankfully many conditions can now be alleviated with prompt treatment. When in doubt ask a vet!