



LIPHOOK
EQUINE HOSPITAL

Care of the New Born Foal

The equine species has adapted to develop very quickly during this initial period, and to exhibit few outward signs of disease to cope with life surrounded by potential predators. This makes close monitoring of foals essential for the first 24 hours of life and early veterinary intervention important if there is any concern.



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Care of the Newborn Foal

When should the newborn foal first stand up?

It is important that during this initial period intervention is kept to a minimum to encourage the essential **mare-foal bond**.

After delivery the foal's hind legs will often remain in 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 clamped or cut. The umbilicus should be dipped in a 0.5% chlorhexidine and alcohol solution, and this should be repeated twice daily for a few days until it is dry. If the mare is still lying down the foal should be moved to her head for her to lick and bond with – the foal should be able to maintain itself on its chest. The mare's licking should stimulate the foal to extend its front legs and after many failed attempts they should be able to **stand within 2 hours of delivery**.

How long should it be before the newborn foal has its first drink?

Once stood up, foals are very quick to search for milk and they should **feed within 4 hours of birth**. Most foals have a suck response immediately after delivery, but it can take several attempts to find the udder and latch on to a teat. Sometimes they may need some gentle guidance in the right direction, or the mare may need to be encouraged to stand still. The foals initial feeds contains the very important colostrum (as long as the mare hasn't been running milk prior to delivery) containing essential components for immunity. It is therefore vital that if the foal has not fed in the first 4 hours of life veterinary assistance is given – this may be by milking the mare and feeding the foal by stomach tube.



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The small intestine's absorption of antibodies (that convey immunity) from the colostrum reduces with time so it is important that they feed within this short window.

We can check the foal's immunity levels via a blood test taken when they are over 12 hours old.

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

Most foals feed up to 7 times an hour when they are awake and gain up to 2Kg of weight daily in their first week of life.

When foals first pass faeces it is called **meconium** and is dark brown/black and very firm. The most common cause of colic in newborn foals is when this material is impacted and it can't be passed easily. If the meconium has not been **passed within 8 hours of delivery**, or if any colic signs are shown such as straining with no faeces being produced, veterinary attention should be sought as the foal may need an enema. The faeces then become gradually softer as the foal continues to feed.

Urination should also be observed during the **first 8 hours of life**.

Normal foal behaviour

Most foals are inquisitive of humans and interact with the mare. An under developed foal is cause for concern – they often have a domed forehead, have low body weight, are weak, have limb deformities and a silky coat. If you are concerned you should contact your vet to discuss the foal and it's delivery.

The foal's first vet check

We encourage all owners to have their newborn foal checked if we have not had to attend before they are 12 hours old. This enables us to check that the mare has sufficient milk and that she has not sustained damage during delivery. It is also important that we check that the entire placenta has been delivered so please save it for us in a bucket!

Assessment of a blood sample from the foal will enable us to check it's immune status – which if low we would advise is boosted by a plasma transfusion. During this first clinical examination we will also assess the umbilicus and advise on its care, and check the heart, eyes and limbs.

A tetanus antitoxin injection will give the foal cover for the first 3 months of life but should then be followed by a vaccination to ensure continued protection from this potentially fatal disease.

Foaling a mare at home can be a joyous experience as long as you are well prepared and are aware of what is normal. This enables you to talk to your vet if you have any concerns – even if it is just for reassurance we would always rather you contacted us sooner rather than later.



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