

Ask A Vet: Red Bag Delivery

Sunday, June 21, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I'm new to this foaling business. This past foaling season, a friend mentioned to me the possibility of my mare having a "red bag" delivery. What is this and what do I need to know about it?

-New to Foaling

Dear New to Foaling,

Foaling can be an event that is equal parts exciting and nerve wracking for novice and experienced horse owners alike. Every owner should be aware of the events of a normal foaling, as well as complications that can arise. One such complication that is an extreme emergency is a premature placental separation, or "red bag delivery." This complication makes up 5-10% of all abortion, stillbirth and perinatal death cases in horses.

In a normal foaling, the chorioallantois (the placental membrane that attaches to the uterus) ruptures and allantoic fluid is released – the horse's "water breaks." After this, a thin, clear membrane, called the amnion ("water bag," the inner layer of the placenta that surrounds the foal) will emerge from the vulva and as labor progresses the foal's front feet and nose should be visible inside the bag. In a red bag delivery, the chorioallantois, which is a velvety red color prematurely separates from the uterine wall and protrudes through the vulva. This causes a very dangerous decrease in oxygen that can reach the foal and the foal can have hypoxia (lack of oxygenation) and can even die if the condition is not corrected.

As veterinarians, it is our job to educate our clients on what to do if this situation were ever to arise. Owners and those assisting with foalings should be instructed to have ready some sharp, clean instrument (such as scissors or a knife) to use to open the red chorioallantois. The veterinarian's number should be kept handy and called AFTER the bag is opened and the foal should be delivered as soon as possible. If available, the foal should be supplemented with oxygen as quickly as possible after delivery. Owners should continue to keep a close eye on the foal, as these foals can develop delayed signs of hypoxia even though they seem clinically normal at birth.

The causes of premature placental separation in the mare are many. Premature placental separation can occur with placentitis, death of a fetal twin or when an abortion is about to happen. If an abortion is about to occur, the delivery of the aborted fetus can be assisted to prevent a dystocia. If the cervix is still closed and the fetus is still alive, progestogen or flunixin meglumine should be given. Antibiotic therapy should be started systemically if placentitis is suspected. Treatment should be continued for 7-14 days.

Please monitor all pregnant mares closely and call your local veterinarian if an abnormality is detected.
Sincerely,

-Dr. Ashley Miller