

Ask A Vet: Postpartum Care for Mares

Sunday, March 16, 2014

Dear Doctor Weldy's,

My mare is due to foal anytime, do you have any tips for the birthing process?

Dear Reader,

Spring is just around the corner and we are seeing the new foal crop for 2014. Most of the time things go smoothly with the foaling process but when there is a foaling problem it is truly a top priority veterinary emergency. Problems during the birthing process, failure to pass the placenta within a few hours after birth, birthing injuries, and infections will cause the rebreeding process to be delayed from the foal heat at 9 days postpartum to the 30 day heat one cycle (21days) later. In order for the mare to foal yearly she needs to conceive fairly soon after birthing compared to most animal species. For brood mares to foal yearly the average time between pregnancies is 10 to 30 days since the average gestation period for mares is 330-345 days. Some mares normal pregnancies can go a full year, and two full sisters bred to the same stallion on the same day can foal normally as much as a full month apart. Mares are usually true to themselves, in other words if they gestate 340 days one year they usually take approximately that long each pregnancy. For this reason postpartum care is critical for a mare. It not only helps ensure her health and chances of conceiving again but helps ensure the well being of her foal.

Her bonding with the foal after birth is important so the foal can suckle the all important colostrum within the first 8-12 hours of life. These passive immunity antibodies in the colostrum can only be absorbed by the foal's stomach for a short time so consumption of 16-32 ounces soon after birth is critical to the foal's survival. These passive antibodies protect the foal from disease until their own immune system is able to produce antibodies. For this reason a foal's first series of vaccinations is usually done at 4-6 months of age. Boosters are given 3-5 weeks later and after that vaccinations are normally given on a yearly basis in the spring before the mosquito vectors appear.

Another key element of postpartum care is to make sure the mare's afterbirth or placenta is normal and completely eliminated ideally 3 hours after foaling. If the mare retains any portion of the placenta she is at risk of developing a uterine infection and endotoxemia. This condition can become life threatening and cause systemic problems like colic and laminitis. A veterinarian should be called if the placenta is retained more than a few hours.

Healthy foals are active from the first breath and in the sternal position within 15 minutes. They should be standing and nursing within a couple of hours and passing first feces within 12 hours of birth. Their navel should be dipped in 7% iodine and depending on the mare's vaccination status a tetanus antitoxin is sometimes administered. Owners can observe and be involved with the foal and mare postpartum, but should be careful not to interfere too much because it could compromise the mare-foal bonding process. Part of normal maternal behavior is to protect her foal so give them some space. Bonding

is popular to train the foal to accept human companionship but must be done properly without endangering the mare's maternal responsibilities.

-Dr. Jerry Sellon