

# Ask A Vet: All Plugged Up

*Sunday, February 28, 2016*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My mare had a foal last week and he was having trouble going to the bathroom. My vet came out and said it was something called a meconium impaction – what is meconium and why can it be a problem?

-Mr. Stick E. Situation

Dear Mr. Situation,

Congratulations on the new foal and thank you for your question! Meconium impactions are seen in young foals, approximately 0-2 days old. Meconium is the first feces that is passed by newborns. It is made up of placental fluid, GI secretions and cellular debris. It is dark green to brown, pellet form to pasty in consistency and should be passed within 4 hours after birth in a normal foal.

If a foal doesn't pass its meconium by 12-36 hours after birth and has been straining to pass it, it is considered to have a meconium impaction. Signs that may be seen with meconium impactions include: failure to completely pass meconium, progressively worsening abdominal pain, frequent posturing and straining to defecate, tail swishing, water spout tail, camped under leg stance, depression and reluctance to nurse. Complications of meconium impactions include: colic, failure to nurse appropriately, colitis and rectal inflammation. These impactions are one of the most common causes of colic in newborn foals – around 1.5% of foals are affected. Colts are more likely to be affected.

If your foal is diagnosed with retained meconium (meconium impaction), your vet will most likely administer an enema to the foal. The most common enemas given are commercially available sodium phosphate preparations (Fleet brand type) or warm soapy water. Occasionally, some impactions may be refractory to this medical treatment and require an enema with a different medication called acetylcysteine. This medication is placed into the rectum and the solution is kept in the rectum for 15-30 minutes before the tubing of the enema is removed. While you may administer the Fleet type enemas at home if you are comfortable, the acetylcysteine type of enema should only be administered by a veterinarian. Some breeding farms will even routinely administer enemas to all of their foals a couple of hours after birth (or to those who begin to show signs of not passing their meconium after a couple of hours) to prevent meconium impactions. After an enema is administered, the foal should be monitored over the following 24-36 hours for complete passage of the meconium. The passage of yellow stool indicates that all meconium has completely passed. Other treatments that may or may not be necessary include fluid therapy, mineral oil, milk of magnesia and pain medications. The majority of foals with impactions are successfully managed medically, but in some foals surgery may be necessary.

Early recognition of this issue is very important in successfully treating the impaction and to the health of the newborn foal. If you think your foal may have not passed its meconium, please contact your local veterinarian.

-Dr. Ashley Vander Wey