

Foaling

Questions always arise even from relatively experienced owners. You have waited for 11 months and sometimes longer! When is your mare overdue and what can or should you do about it? The duration of pregnancy (gestation) in the mare is variable but usually is from 335 -346 days after conception but can be from 307 – 420 days. Periods over 400 days are extremely rare although shorter periods around say 310 days are less unusual. Don't worry that the foal is dead if the pregnancy is prolonged as mares abort dead foals promptly. Consult your veterinary surgeon if you are worried. He or she can examine the mare to assess her health and use an ultrasound examination / rectal examination to assess the position of the foal and the integrity of the placenta at the cervix. Ascending infections from the vulva forwards to the cervix cause a thickening of the placenta which can be measured with the ultrasound equipment. All rectal examinations carry a risk in the horse and safe facilities will limit this risk. Premature foals i.e. those that are born before 315 days or those that visually weak require intensive effort on behalf of the owner and their vets.

How do you tell when your mare is due to give birth? Not an easy task as although the text books give the signs as udder enlargement, waxing up of the teats in the preceding 12-24 hours before birth and possible loss of milk/colostrums along with a slackening of the vulva , all the mares I have known don't read text books! I don't want to sound facetious but each mare is an individual and should be treated as such. Many mares sweat behind the elbows and flanks a few hours before birth whilst being relatively comfortable and still eating. As this first stage of labour progresses the mare becomes restless and wanders around the box. The tail may be slightly raised or held to one side. Mild colicky signs of tail swishing and kicking at the abdomen increase along with crouching and getting down and up, looking at the flanks. Stage one takes a few hours (1-4) and finishes with the rupture of the water bag heralding stage 2 – the actual birth. The fluid resembles urine and there is not a huge volume.

The birth process itself is rapid and violent! Taking only 20 minutes on average to deliver the foal. Straining occurs as the amnion is visible at the vulval lips. This is the sac that encloses the foal. It is bluish white to transparent and relatively thick, if not broken by the foal it will suffocate an otherwise viable foal. It contains a thicker fluid with lubricant qualities(Have a pair of scissors available to break it if necessary.) by now the mare is usually down on one side and having regular forcible contractions in batches of 3-4 followed by a short rest. If you get your arm between the mare's pelvis and the foal it will hurt and has been known to break a human arm! Soon after the appearance of the amnion a foot is evident then another foot approximately 6 inches behind the first and hopefully a nose. By having the feet a little behind the other the foals elbows pass through the mares pelvis one at a time and so make the best use of available space. The greatest maternal effort occurs to expel the head and once the foal is delivered the mare rests for up to 30 minutes often with the hind feet of the foal still in the vagina. During this time the umbilical cord is still delivering blood to the foal and is very important and can account for 10% of the foals total blood volume. The foal itself may break the cord as it struggles to rise. The cord breaks 2-3 inches from the foals body. Fortunately foalings that require human / veterinary assistance are rare at 1-2% compared with up to 20 % in

cattle. Foetal oversize is uncommon even in a Shire x Shetland as the size of the foal is determined by the uterine size of the mare more than the genetics; again unlike the situation in today's cattle where a continental sire can commonly cause a large calf and difficult calving. If in doubt call your vet. I'm sure like me they are happier to arrive 20 times at night to find a foal has already been delivered alive rather than once in normal hours where the foal is already dead.

The third and final stage of parturition is the expulsion of the foetal membranes i.e. 'cleansing' This takes on average 1 hour but could take 3-4 or less than 30 minutes.

Traditionally retention of the afterbirth for over 2 hours was considered an emergency as most horses were draft in type and retention of the afterbirth commonly led on to a uterine infection 'metritis' with subsequent Laminitis which can be life threatening in a heavy horse. Modern antibiotics and anti inflammatory drugs have modified the panic. In a heavy horse I am still happier to deal with a retained afterbirth at 4-6 hours but in other breeds there is rarely a reason to disturb my sleep!

Equipment ready at hand should include – a clean bucket with access to clean water preferably warm. Soap, tail bandage, veterinary lubricant, clean soft ropes and a broom handle cut in 3 equal parts to wrap the ropes around for traction. An enema for the foal plus a suitable disinfectant for the navel.(consult your Vet)