

Foaling and the First Hours

by Alesia Willard

What you need to know for a smooth foaling process

AS SPRING DRAWS NEAR, it's time to prepare for the foals that will soon arrive. Whether this is your first foaling or your tenth, you need to be properly equipped and ready to handle any complications that might arise.

Be Prepared

Here are some things that should be done before the big day:

1. If the mare is foaling in a stall, make sure it is thoroughly cleaned and bedded with straw. Do not use shavings, as they can stick to the mare or foal and cause a variety of problems.
2. Make sure your mare, whether maiden or not, is accustomed to having her milk bag handled so she will allow the foal to nurse.
3. Have a foaling kit prepared. The kit should contain the following:
 - **A flashlight** in case the mare foals outside or the indoor lighting is inadequate.
 - **Several lengths of string** to tie off the umbilical cord in case it will not break on its own. Never cut the cord; it will not heal quickly or properly and could cause an excessive amount of bleeding. You can also pinch the umbilical cord with your nail until it breaks off if you are unable to tie it off.
 - **Disinfectant**, such as iodine, to clean the umbilical stump after the cord breaks.
 - **A bucket or sturdy bag** to put the placenta in. Examine the placenta very closely. There should only be one hole where the foal came out. If the bag has more than one hole, call your vet right away. Some of the sack may still be inside the mare, which can cause serious infection.
 - **Clean towels** to help dry the foal if necessary.
 - **An enema**, to be used in case the foal needs help passing its meconium (first bowel movement). One Fleet® mineral oil enema, slightly warmed, works well.

Also, make sure you have a phone and your vet's phone number handy in case of an emergency.

The Foaling Process

Over ninety percent of mares give birth naturally without a problem. If you plan to be near the mare while she gives birth,



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make sure you stand back and give her space. The mare may thrash around while trying to reposition the foal for giving birth. Be sure you do not upset her by making noise or talking too loudly. The mare should be as relaxed as possible; she could end up hurting the foal or herself if she gets spooked.

In the event that the foal becomes trapped in the birth canal, the only way to get him out safely is to assist in removing him. Call your vet immediately so he or she may assist you in getting the foal free. Never pull the foal straight out; you can cause serious problems and end up pulling the mare's insides out with the foal. Instead, be patient and work only as the mare contracts so you are pulling with her, not against her. Keep a steady hold of the foal's ankles so he does not slip back in when the mare is between

contractions. You may need help doing this. Gently pull the foal outward and downward toward the mare's legs, as the foal would naturally be born.

Again, if at any time you have questions or concerns, call your vet immediately.

After Birth

Once the foal is born and the umbilical cord has broken, (this should happen when the mare stands up), dip the navel stump in iodine. Then leave the

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mare and foal alone to bond. These few moments are the most important part of a newborn foal's life. This bonding will help the mare recognize her foal and the foal will learn to recognize his mother.

If you have decided to imprint the foal, after this time would be the best time to do it. Don't rush it—allow mom to bond first. Though imprinting is very good for the foal, it is not always necessary. If the mare seems uneasy or on edge, leave them alone. The last thing you want is to have the mare get scared and injure herself or the foal. There is always time to imprint the foal when he is a few hours old. See the sidebar for recommended reading on foal imprinting.

Once the mare and foal have bonded, the foal will try to stand. Let the foal figure it out on his own. If you are tempted to assist the foal in standing because you do not like watching him continue to fall, think about this: a foal's lungs are filled with fluids from being inside the womb. The only way to get these fluids out is for the foal to fall as it tries to stand. Nature knows best how to care for these babies. Try not to interfere.

The Foal's First Hours

A foal should be standing within an hour or two after birth. If he isn't, call the vet. There may be something wrong. Once the foal is standing, the mare should help him find her milk. If he cannot find the milk on his own, gently guide him along to it. Let him nurse as long as he wants; he needs to get as much colostrum as possible, and the mare will usually only produce colostrum for about 24 hours after birth. This fluid is crucial to give the foal the antibodies he needs to become strong and fight off infections.

Once the foal has nursed, give him and the mare time to rest. Giving birth and being born are both very tiring.

Watch the foal closely to see if he passes the meconium (his first bowel movement), which should pass within a few hours after birth. Do not be alarmed if it looks weird. It should look green or mustard yellow and be very "sloppy." He should pass his first urine shortly after this.

Continuing Care

Continue to dip the navel stump in iodine over the next few weeks. By about a month old it should fall off. Continue regularly until it does. If at any point things do go wrong, or something just doesn't seem right, do not waste time—call the vet right away.

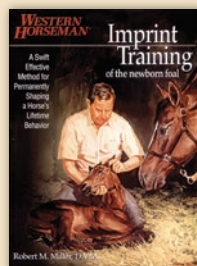
If you still have questions or concerns while waiting upon the birth of your new foal, consult your vet and do your research. **NWHS**

About the Author

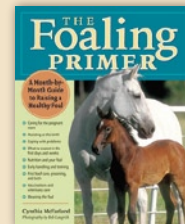
Alesia C. Willard has loved horses ever since she was a kid. Now 17 years old, she is certified in post-natal care for foals. She currently owns two horses (a once-feral mare and a 9-month-old filly) along with 3 other family horses.

Learn More About Foaling

A couple of books I've found very helpful:



Imprint Training of the Newborn Foal
by Robert M. Miller



The Foaling Primer: A Month-by-Month Guide to Raising a Healthy Foal
by Cynthia McFarland

Also, see the following past articles from NWHS:

- "Prenatal Planning" by Dr. Wendy Vaala
- "The Basics of Foal Imprinting" by Angel S. Gnau
- "Whole Health Mare Care" by Nicole Lanphear
- "Bacteria and Foal Health" by Dr. Christine King
- "Work with Your Newborn" by Patrick Hooks

You can learn a lot by reading. You can learn even more by asking questions!