

A REFRESHER COURSE ON FOALING

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Winter is finally coming to an end and spring is just around the corner! Those pregnant mares are starting to show and the babies we are so eagerly awaiting are almost ready to make their first appearance. Here are a few things to consider as we plan for the safe delivery of our new partners and well-being of our old friends.

Nutrition:

The majority of foals are born between April and June, making this time of year nutritionally critical for our blossoming broodmares. Towards the end of their gestation, to ensure optimal condition for foaling and milk production, mares need a high quality and a well balanced ration.

While there are several commercial rations available specifically for pregnant and lactating mares, keep in mind that our lovely Fjords do have a tendency to gain weight and may not require the amounts the feeding guides recommend. A high quality, roughage-based diet with a well balanced mineral and vitamin supplement is usually enough for our mares.

Shots, Worming and Trimming:

Look back over your mare's health records and ensure she is up to date with all her vaccines and worming. It is recommended that pregnant mares be given a Pneumabort-K (Fort Dodge) vaccine at five, seven and nine months' gestation to prevent the risk of Rhino which can cause loss of pregnancy. Most veterinarians recommend a mare be given nothing in her last month of pregnancy, so now is a good time to update anything that may have been missed.

Trim her hooves regularly so as not to put added stress on her legs and feet as she gets heavier towards the end of her pregnancy.

Gestation Dates:

Generally a mare's gestation is between 330 and 350 days. Keep track of your mare's previous pregnancy and foaling history to better predict her foaling date. If she is a maiden mare (one who has not had a foal before) or a new mare to your herd, then your best bet is to estimate her foaling date and monitor her closely as it approaches. Many factors, such as weather and nutrition, play a part in the length of time a mare carries her foal.

Foaling Area:

Consider the area you have designated for foaling. It should be free from debris and hazards, and large enough that she is not restricted when she lies down during delivery. (minimum 12ft by 12ft)

Many people have designated foaling stalls in their barns. These areas should be large enough that the mare can lay down stretched out and still have room for the foal to be delivered. Should you not have a stall large enough, it is safest for both mare and foal to keep her outside in a clean, safe enclosure.

Bedding and footing are important for safe delivery. If you plan to have your mare foal indoors then ensure she has a deep bed of straw. Shavings and sawdust are commonly used beddings but not ideal for foaling as they tend to stick to the wet foal. Shavings and straw can even lodge in the nostrils and eyes of the newborn and can easily be inhaled.

Straw on the other hand, is absorbent and provides good cushioning for your mare. The downside of straw as a bedding choice is that our darling Fjords will eat almost anything, especially after an ordeal such as giving birth! It is important to keep an eye on your mare and provide her with her own high quality hay to distract her from eating too much straw. Ingesting coarse, dry feed such as straw can cause impaction and lead to colic. Shavings can be substituted once baby is up and around and adjusting to life

in the outside world.

If you have decided to have your mare foal outside, ensure her designated area is clean and safe. The fencing should be such that the baby can not be injured as it adjusts to its new legs. Also check that the area is escape resistant. Clean grass is an ideal surface for foaling, but avoid muddy enclosures if possible. Ultimately your mare will pick where she feels comfortable. One of my girls decided on the one area of dirt in her large, grass paddock!

Most mares prefer to have their foals in private, absent from their owners and herd mates, and can become quite agitated if too much is going on after baby is born. For this reason she may be happier in her own enclosure within site of her herd mates. If your mare is kept outdoors it is very important she and her foal have access to shelter from both the wind and rain.

Indications of Imminent Foaling:

As your mare gets closer to foaling you will notice an increase in both the size of the udder and the 'milk veins' surrounding it. Her conformation will change as she experiences shifting in her muscle structure in preparation for birthing.

You may notice a waxy build up on her teats and may see colostrum dripping. It is very important that you monitor your mare closely during her last few days and if she is losing large amounts of colostrum, it may be necessary to milk her and store it to prevent her foal from missing out on its vital first meal. Some dripping is normal but a foal that does not receive colostrum, either from its dam or by bottle, will not survive. Many breeders keep a supply of frozen colostrum on hand for emergency use and most equine veterinarians have access to commercially produced IGG supplements that can be given orally or by IV if the foal is too weak to suck.

The Delivery:

The delivery is a relatively quick process and usually takes place right after you have been out to check your mare or run to the house for a bathroom break! For this reason some people choose to have video monitors in their foaling areas. This leaves the mare in peace but allows the owner to keep a close eye on her should she need assistance.

There is little room for error when a mare foals. Any complications are considered an emergency and should be handled as such. Luckily, foaling complications are relatively rare but when they do occur, are serious and often life threatening. These complications can be minimized by educating yourself on foaling emergencies and how to handle them, and by diligently monitoring your mare as her due date approaches.

A general guideline after birth is the 1, 2, 3 rule. 1 hour after birth for the foal to stand; 2 hours for it to nurse; 3 hours for the mare to pass her placenta.

It is important that the mare passes her entire placenta soon after birth. A retained placenta for more than a few hours after foaling can cause a toxic reaction and lead to illness, laminitis and even death. If at all possible, examine the mare's placenta after she passes it to ensure it is complete and no pieces have been left behind. If your mare has not passed her placenta in the allotted 3 hours, contact your veterinarian immediately for treatment and advice.

Foaling can be stressful but by arming yourself with as much information and knowledge as possible you can greatly decrease your anxiety and approach the experience with anticipation and excitement. There is nothing in the world more adorable than a Norwegian Fjord foal. All that worry, stress and waiting will be worth it when you meet your furry little baby for the first time!

