

VET DIARY



OUR EXPERT

Nicola Thompson is a qualified vet who works for Wright & Moreton in Cheshire, a member practice of XL Equine. She has ridden since she was a child.

Baby boom

Our vet columnist Nicola Thompson focuses on foaling, with some tips on what to expect

Having a foal is an exciting time and, if your mare's due date is getting closer, you are sure to be keeping a close eye on her.

There are three stages to a foaling. During stage one, the mare will exhibit signs that are similar to colic – she will be unsettled and get up and lie down and occasionally kick at her belly. She is likely to lose her appetite.

This can last several hours, especially if the mum-to-be is disturbed.

The second stage is delivery of the foal. The mare's 'waters' will break and the foal should emerge within 20 minutes.

Foals are ideally born in a swan dive position, with the head resting on the forelegs. If the mare is struggling or you only see one leg or a head, call your vet immediately. Most mares foal without help but if she gets into difficulty, speed is essential as both mum and baby will be at risk.

Once the foal is on the floor he should breathe within 30 seconds – to help, you can clear the mucus from his nose and mouth.

Don't break the umbilical cord as this happens naturally as the mare or foal stands.

The foal's navel should be dipped in iodine solution to help prevent infection. His mum should show interest in him straight away

and will usually start licking him clean. Try to leave the mare and foal to bond.

Most foals stand within 90 minutes and have a strong instinct to suckle. They should have their first drink within two to three hours.

The first milk they drink is important. It's called colostrum and contains all the antibodies a foal needs from his dam.

Without this, the foal will not have any protection against disease for the first few



Surprise, surprise

You may not be planning to breed a foal, but even experienced horse people have been

"The first milk a foal drinks contains antibodies to protect him from disease"

months of his life, until his own immune system develops. If a foal isn't suckling, call your vet.

The foal should also pass droppings fairly quickly – first droppings (meconium) are quite firm and dark green in colour.

Foals can become constipated and some need an enema. If you see a foal pass soft, light-coloured droppings they will already have passed the meconium.

Night-time appearance

The third stage of foaling involves passing the afterbirth (placenta).

If this hasn't happened within six hours, a vet will need to assist, as retaining it can be life-threatening. Inflammation of the uterus leads to a response which can trigger laminitis.

Once the placenta has passed it should be examined for tears. Place it in a bag for your vet to examine when they visit to check the foal.

Most foalings occur between 10pm and 4am, so foals should be up and about before you get to the yard. They should be alert, but remember babies do sleep a lot.

caught out after buying a mare that was secretly expecting.

Imagine arriving at the yard in the morning to muck out your horse's stable, and finding her stood happily alongside a newborn foal. It would be quite a surprise!

This scenario is not as uncommon as you might think and it's something two of my clients went through.

If you are buying a mare who looks overweight or whose belly swells after you have bought her, consider that she could be pregnant.

In equines, the gestation period lasts 11 months so it isn't always very new horses that can be harbouring a surprise.

If you suspect that a mare is in foal, or is foaling, you should contact your veterinary practice for advice. ■

Next issue: In her next column (October issue, on sale 27 August), Nicola discusses the potentially fatal condition grass sickness.

There are three stages to foaling

