

You've waited patiently, or not so patiently, for the past eleven months for your mare to deliver the foal that she's been carrying. You've done everything in your power to ensure her health and well-being so that she produces a healthy, thriving youngster. Now that the new arrival is here, you need to make sure that he gets a good start in life.

Once the mare's labor is over and the foal is delivered, most mares will rest quietly for a few minutes. Sometimes, the foal's hind legs will still be inside the mare's vagina. During this rest period, blood is draining from the placenta into the foal. This is a necessary part of the post-foaling time, and the foal and mare should not be encouraged to rise immediately unless there is a medical need. Gently, clear any placental membranes and liquid from the foal's nose and mouth, but let him rest. Soon, the mare should get to her feet, and this motion will break the umbilical cord. Once the cord breaks, the stump should be treated with tincture of iodine, povidone iodine solution, or chlorhexidine solution to disinfect and cauterize it. The cord should stop bleeding very quickly and does not need to be tied under normal circumstances.

If the weather is cold or the foal appears chilled, vigorously rub him with dry towels to dry his coat. This will also stimulate his respiratory and circulatory systems. Do not dry him completely because the mare should lick him and smell his scent as part of the bonding process. Unnecessary intervention by people can interfere with this bonding and cause problems with the mare's acceptance of the foal. Once the mare is caring for him, leave the stall and watch them closely from outside the door.

The foal should begin to move around and make attempts to stand within the first 30-40 minutes after birth. His first efforts will be somewhat comical and disorganized, but he should become more coordinated after a few minutes. Normal foals should be able to stand unassisted within the first 1 ½ hours after birth. If the stall flooring is slippery, he may need to be helped until he can get those long legs organized. Administration of an enema at this time encourages the passage of meconium, the first somewhat hard fecal matter that is present in the rectum.

Once the foal is standing, he will begin nosing around the stall and mare looking for his first meal. Normally, the mare will nicker to him and try to nudge him in the right direction. Do not be disheartened if his initial attempts to suckle are aimed at the mare's elbow or the stall walls. As the minutes go by, he should get the idea and latch onto a teat. This first colostrum meal is very important as it contains necessary antibodies that the foal needs to survive. Ideally, a newborn foal should nurse vigorously from the mare within the first 2 hours of his life. Colostrum can only be absorbed by the foal's digestive tract within the first 6-12 hours of life so it is very important that he nurses adequately.

Nursing by the foal stimulates the mare's body to produce the hormone oxytocin. One of oxytocin's effects is to cause uterine contraction and subsequent expulsion of the placenta. This is the third stage of the mare's labor and should be completed within 3 hours of foaling.

The mare and foal should be examined by a veterinarian the day following the birth to ensure that there are no health issues. The foal will be evaluated for hernias, a cleft palate, congenital cataracts, normal fecal and urine production, a heart murmur, and various other health problems. In addition, a blood sample will be drawn to determine if he has absorbed enough colostrum from the mare. The mare will be checked to ensure that she is producing adequate milk, has not sustained a vaginal tear during foaling, and that she has come through the experience in good health. Both mare and foal will be dewormed with ivermectin to reduce the chance of *Strongyloides westeri*, a worm that the mare can pass to the foal in her milk.

If everything goes as planned, the first hours of a foal's life can be a wonderful experience to watch. However, immediate veterinary attention is necessary if there is any indication that events are not proceeding normally. The health of the mare and foal depend on it.