



Raising a Healthy Foal from Birth to Weaning

By Suzanne Mund, DVM

So you have a healthy bouncing baby foal that cleared its first exam with your veterinarian. Now what? How do you make sure your baby stays healthy while it is still on its dam? What can you expect during the first few months of its life and what can you do to optimize its health?

In the first month, foals should have access to turn out for at least 12 hours a day but they should not have forced exercise as the physis' (growth plates) are growing and can become damaged if a foal is forced to work hard. Damage to the growth plates can contribute to angular limb deformities. Young foals will sleep often during the day and should be nursing from their dam up to 3 of 4 times an hour. If you notice that the foal is nursing for longer periods (up to half an hour total time in an hour) it may be that the dam does not have enough milk. The foal may require some supplementation in the form of milk pellets and the dam may require a better diet. Your foal may start nibbling at its dam's food and even her feces. This is important to help establish a normal flora in the foal's gut so he can better digest the feed that he will soon start consuming regularly.

When your farrier comes to do your mare's feet, have him examine the foal's feet as well. In addition to having your foal become accustomed to having its feet handled, the farrier can often identify early limb deformities that can be corrected by rasping the affected hoof. Contact your veterinarian if your foal begins developing an angular limb deformity (toeing in, toeing out) at this early stage as some these problems are easily addressed sooner rather than later.

By month two, your foal will require its first deworming. The targeted parasites are ascarids, or large round worms. A good first time deworming product is one that contains fenbendazole. Be sure to dose appropriately by weight and use a weigh tape if you are unsure how much your foal weighs. Foals can be introduced to creep feeds as well. Place the creep in an area where the foal can easily and safely access the feed but the mare cannot. It is very important that at this stage your foal does not consume more than 0.75-1.0 lbs of creep per 100 lbs of body weight a day as high energy feeds in a young rapidly growing foal can contribute to growth abnormalities such as physitis (inflammation of the growth plates) and contracted tendons. Foals will also start nibbling at their dams hay and will start grazing although they will still get the majority of their nutrients from the dam.

By month three, your foal can receive its first set of vaccinations if dam was not vaccinated shortly before the foal was born. In Florida, due to the year round presence of disease vectors such as mosquitoes, it is recommended that foals are vaccinated for Eastern and Western encephalitis ("sleeping sickness"), West Nile Virus and tetanus. At this age, your foal will be even more active and will be growing rapidly and will start transitioning itself to a more solid feed diet although it will still require much of its nutrients from its dam's milk.

During month four, your foal will continue to grow and be active. If necessary, it is possible to wean your foal now although it would still benefit nutritionally from its dam. It would also still be learning how to act like a horse from its dam which is important to avoid some behavioral issues in the future. It should be dewormed a second time with a product containing fenbendazole.

In the fifth month, you should start preparing your foal for weaning. Your foal should be vaccinated 2-4 weeks before weaning so he has a strong immune response to vaccines prior to the stresses of weaning. It

should receive its first vaccine for EWT and WNV or it's booster if vaccinated two months prior, and should receive his first vaccine for rabies. It is optional to vaccinate for rhinopneumonitis (herpes), influenza, and strangles at this stage and it depends on whether you plan on travelling and showing your foal as a youngster where it may have exposure to these pathogens. In order to prepare him mentally, you can start periodically separating it from its dam for short periods of time to accustom both the mare and foal to being apart from one another. Your foal should be getting the majority of his nutrition from his feed and not from his dam and many mares begin drying up at this pre-weaning stage as their foal becomes more independent.

Your foal is finally ready to be weaned! Immediately prior to weaning, have your veterinarian perform a fecal egg count and determine whether your next dewormer should be targeted towards ascarids or strongyles. Your foal should be eating 1 pound per hundred pounds of body weight of a good quality concentrate once a day and be eating a high quality timothy and alfalfa hay. Low stress weaning should be encouraged in order to minimize stress on your foal and to avoid the "weaner slump" that many foals go through. This can be done by first keeping dam and foal in separate stalls beside one another with individual turn out then gradually increasing their distance apart until the mare can be separated from the foal with no distress from either party. It is generally recommended that the two be completely separated out of ear shot from one another for at least a few months so that the foal does not continue to periodically suckle into its yearling life.

Congratulations! You raised a healthy well-adjusted member of equine society! Your foal is well on it's way to becoming a healthy wonderful adult horse. Remember these are general guidelines and all foals are different individuals. Unless you are a well-seasoned foal owner, you should use these recommendations as general guidelines and consult with your veterinarian on what would be ideal for your individual baby.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

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