



**MEMBERS ONLY**

**FOALING TIME OR  
TIME TO CALL THE  
VET?**



*Exclusively Equine*  
VETERINARY SERVICES



# FOALING TIME OR TIME TO CALL THE VET?

**What's normal before, during and after foaling? Learn how to identify problems during foaling that require immediate veterinary attention.**

The normal gestational period for mares varies from 320 to 345 days. The hardest thing to predict is when your mare will go into labour. While there are many signs to look for, not all signs, such as teat waxing or udder development, will occur before the foal arrives.

The only sure sign is taking bloods to check hormone levels. If you know your mare, she will certainly show signs of restlessness and pacing as labour approaches. When things go to plan, a foaling is easy, stress-free and usually over in 30 minutes to an hour.

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There are three stages to a normal foaling:

## **1 STAGE ONE 30 Minutes - 6 Hours**

The first stage involves uterine contractions and cervical relaxation. This stage can vary from 30 minutes to six hours or more. This stage can be controlled, to some extent, by the mare and, if she is upset or not comfortable with her surroundings, she can postpone the start of the second stage of labour for hours and, sometimes, days.

During this first stage, the foal is actively getting into the correct position for the impending birth. Normal signs associated with the first stage of labour are rolling, pawing, kicking at the abdomen, anorexia, sweating and frequent urination.

## **2 STAGE TWO 10 Minutes - 60 Minutes**

The start of stage two labour occurs when the chorioallantois ruptures (commonly called 'waters breaking'), and a sudden release of tan- or red-coloured fluid expels from the vagina. Stage two is defined as the delivery of the foal, and should take only 10 minutes and no longer than 60 minutes.

During this stage, you will see active abdominal contractions and the mare may lay down. The contractions will come in waves, with the mare resting between waves.

Initially, you will see a bluish-white sac at the vulva, followed by two legs, one slightly in front of the other, and then the foal's muzzle. Once the foal enters the birth canal, the contractions usually become more frequent.

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Immediately post-foaling, it is important to allow the umbilical cord to rupture naturally - whether it be when the mare or foal stands.

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### **3** STAGE THREE 1 Hour - 3 Hours

Stage three of labour involves the expulsion of the placental membranes and the onset of uterine involution. This stage should take between one and three hours. Immediately post-foaling, it is important to allow the umbilical cord to rupture naturally - whether it be when the mare stands or the foal attempts to stand.

Once the cord has ruptured, it is advised to spray or soak the umbilical stump with iodine to prevent infections tracking up the umbilical cord.



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The foal's pulse rate at birth should be between 40 and 80 beats per minute. An abnormally slow or fast rate may indicate the foal has suffered birth asphyxia (oxygen shortage)

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### **NEWBORN FOAL'S VITAL SIGNS**

It is good practice to record the newborn foal's vital signs at birth. The foal's temperature at birth should be 37.5-38 degrees.

The foal's pulse rate at birth should be between 40 and 80 beats per minute. An abnormally slow or fast rate may indicate the foal has suffered birth asphyxia (oxygen shortage).

Following birth, the foal's respiration rate should be:

- 80 breaths per minute at birth
- 40-60 breaths per minute at 15 mins old
- 30-40 breaths per minute at 12 hours old



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During foaling, you should only intervene if you notice a problem. Seeking advice from a veterinarian is imperative if something goes wrong.

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### INTERESTING FOAL FACTS

- A newborn foal's legs are already 80-90% of the length they will be when fully grown.
- Foals can be wormed from two weeks of age and vaccinations can start at three months.
- Foals will feed for 1.5 to 2 minutes, 18 to 24 times a day.
- Foals will sleep for 15 to 30 minutes, 20 to 25 times a day.
- Foals reach 90% of their adult size by the age of two years.
- Meconium is a dark brown, black or greenish faeces, which is very sticky and has a somewhat rubbery consistency. It is stored in the rectum, colon and caecum during foetal life. Following birth, it is expelled as the process of suckling, taking food through the mouth and digestion in the intestines begins for the first time.

### WHEN TO INTERFERE

- The mare has been streaming milk for 12 hours or more with no sign of labour.
- The waters have broken, but there's no sign of contractions or no further progress.
- There's malpresentation of the foal.
- The placenta has appeared at the vulva before the foal.
- The foal's hoof is emerging through the mare's anus.
- The foal is unwilling or unable to stand within one hour after birth.
- The foal is unwilling or unable to suckle within two hours after birth.
- The mare is showing signs of colic post-foaling.
- The placenta has not passed within four hours after birth.
- You have concerns the entire placenta hasn't been passed.
- The placental membranes is covering the foal's muzzle outside the pelvic canal.

### SEEK ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE

If any of these situations occur, call your local veterinarian as soon as possible and seek guidance.

During foaling, you should only intervene if you notice a problem. Seeking advice from a veterinarian is imperative if something goes wrong. It may be the difference between life and death for your mare or newborn foal.