

Points on Pets: Mares tend to give birth when undisturbed by owners

by R.G. Elmore, D.V.M.

Q: Several months ago, we purchased a pregnant quarter horse for our daughter. Our mare is due to foal in the first of January. We are becoming nervous about what will happen and whether or not we will be adequately prepared for this huge event in our daughter's life.

Do we need to be present for the birth? If so, what should we be prepared to do?

Do we need to have a veterinarian on call during the month of January?

A. While the vast majority of mares have their foals without any difficulty and without any help from their owners or veterinarians, expected foalings usually cause some level of anxiety in most horse owners, especially the inexperienced ones. Since most mares have the ability to delay their foalings if they are nervous or uncomfortable, most have them when no humans are present. Therefore, even if you plan to be present when your daughter's mare has her foal, it is likely that she will wait until you leave the barn or fall to sleep due to exhaustion from sitting up and watching her.

Most foal while lying quietly on their sides. Following foaling, most mares and their newborns remain recumbent for 15 to 20 minutes. During this period of rest, blood is still passing from the fetal membranes inside of the mare to the foal through the umbilical cord. Therefore, it is important to not startle the mare causing her to jump up immediately following the birth. Rupturing the umbilical cord too early can lead to a loss in blood for the foal. The umbilical cord usually separates spontaneously when the mare rises.

To avoid the possibility of suffocation, the fetal membranes covering the face should be carefully removed while the mare and foal are still lying down. It is not unusual for the foal to take 30 to 60 minutes to stand for the first time.

As soon as the umbilical cord ruptures, it should be dipped in a mild iodine solution. This will reduce the chance that the foal will develop a navel illness due to bacteria from the environment contaminating the open cord. Most newborn foals nurse within the first two hours following birth. It is important for the foal to ingest a colostrum or first milk soon after birth.

You should have your veterinarian examine your mare and foal soon after the foaling occurs. He or she can give you advice regarding necessary vaccinations and other procedures to ensure that your foal gets a good start early in life. Hopefully, your mare will have a healthy, normal foal without the need for help.

Q:I know that every year you have questions about antifreeze poisoning in dogs and cats. Is this still a problem?

It seems like we do not worry about flushing our radiators as often as we used to several years ago.

A: Although home maintenance of cars has become less popular, antifreeze poisoning of pets is still a serious problem every fall and winter. Small amounts of antifreeze on the floor of the garage can be extremely dangerous. As little as 6 tablespoons can cause the death of a 25-pound dog and the ingestion of 1 tablespoon can cause the death of a 10-pound cat.

Many animals that have been poisoned by accidentally drinking antifreeze have survived when treated soon after ingestion has occurred; however, prevention is much better than treatment.

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