

Foaling – a guide

The gestation period for a donkey can vary from 11 to 14 ½ months from the last date of service.

For the majority of the pregnancy the mare will be happy with her usual routine and companions. As foaling approaches she will become more solitary. Consideration should now be given to where the foal may best be born. A large airy stable is preferable, disinfected and prepared with fresh, ample bedding and well banked-up around the edges. Remove any protruding items. Hay should be offered in small quantities on the floor, with water in small shallow buckets



The udder will swell and subside for as long as four weeks before finally increasing in size to the stage where the teats and udder are swollen and almost indistinguishable from one another. Milk may even be exuding from the teats.

During the final forty-eight hours the pelvic muscles will slacken and the hindquarters will lose muscle tone.

The mare will become restless, may roll frequently and may stop eating. Once foaling begins it is a fairly rapid process, taking maybe forty minutes from the first signs of the bag of amniotic fluid protruding from the vulva to the point where the foal is free from the mare. Normal presentation is a diving position with the head between the forelegs.

If there are any doubts as to the normality of the presentation a veterinary surgeon should be called immediately.

Stand back and quietly watch, apart from carefully ensuring, when the foal is born, that its nostrils are free from any membranes or mucus. Movement from either the mare or the foal will break the umbilical cord. Spray or dip the end on the cord with an antiseptic preparation recommended by your vet.

The mare will dry and clean the foal by licking it, this also helps the bonding process. After a short rest the foal will try to stand, making many abortive attempts. **The mare should pass the placenta within the next hour - if no progress is made within 2 hours call your vet.**



Foals are programmed by nature to search for an udder in shadow, confusingly there is shadow between the front legs as well as the hind ones. Experienced mares will help their foals by circling and nudging in the right direction, whereas maiden mares, perhaps confused and upset, may not offer the same degree of help and even reject or attack the foal. In this case urgent intervention and veterinary assistance will be required.

It is very important that the foal receives the mare's first milk (or colostrum) as this contains essential antibodies. An anti-tetanus injection can be given and a foal "check" carried out by your veterinary surgeon the following day.



Within twenty-four hours the foal will have the capacity to move quickly and confidently. Both mare and foal will benefit from enjoying a little sunshine and the opportunity to exercise in a safe and secure paddock.

It is essential that the foal does not get wet or cold, seek veterinary advice should they appear listless or "out of sorts".

Milk is the foal's sole nutritional requirement for the first few weeks, but they soon pluck at strands of hay and grass, or will nibble at their mothers feed.

The stable must be kept clean and free from soiled bedding. Ventilation must be good but draught-free, and water should be offered from a bucket secured in a holder to avoid accidents.

Foals develop rapidly, and lessons learned at this stage are invaluable. A soft foal slip (head collar) can be fitted and used to guide the foal out to the field with its mother. Even at this stage the simple command of "walk on" at the appropriate moment will reap dividends later, whilst gentle stroking of the lower legs and lifting of the feet are simple aids towards future good behaviour with the farrier.

Weaning – There are different opinions on how to wean – "natural", "gradual" or "clean break". They all have their own merits and pitfalls. Be guided by your vet, or an experienced advisor.

Male foals should be castrated between 10-18 months old, earlier castration may be appropriate if the foal attempts to mount the mare. Castration should be carried out at a time of year that avoids major fly worry.

Check List

Vets telephone number

Feeding bottle with lamb teat

Phone number for emergency supply of mares milk replacer

Hopefully you will only need to phone your vet to come and see a healthy foal and a happy mum!

If you have any doubts or worries before, during or after foaling please call your vet.