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Congratulations!!! You're now a mother- The challenge of orphan foals

This month we consider the orphan foal, something that hopefully most people won't have to experience, but it is something that needs considering. It warrants special attention and requires professional help, advice and patience. A little knowledge can go a long way.



In the ideal world, time would allow planning for the orphan foal, but this doesn't happen in reality.

Is an orphan foal going to be different?

The simple answer is YES!

For example, the dam would normally provide heat to the foal. Foal's rapidly lose heat as they have a large surface area to body mass ratio, so this must be considered when bedding down stables etc. Without colostrum, immunity may be impaired; therefore the orphan foal is more prone to illnesses, including sepsis, joint ill, gastric ulcers etc. They will have a different disposition with the potential to develop handling problems as they become older.

What major decisions need to be made?

The major considerations are:

Should I hand rear or foster the orphan foal?

If I hand rear the foal should I bottle feed or bucket/bowl feed?

There are pro's and con's to all decisions. Hand rearing is labour intensive, but fostering requires a foster mare and a lot of expert time and skill in the initial period.

Hand Rearing

If you decide to hand rear the orphan foal, then welcome to the world of mother hood!! This foal will be your baby, toddler and then stropky teenager for the next 4-6 months of its life and yours!

The main consideration is what to feed the foal, when and how much. This is the main subject that this information sheet will concentrate on. Please see last month's info sheet for the normal healthy foal.

What to feed?

Your options are mare's milk, goat's milk or milk replacer. Cow's milk is no good for foals. If mare's milk cannot be provided then it is recommended to use a good quality mare's milk replacer.



How much and when to feed?

The foal may initially struggle with digestibility and have diarrhea so the replacer should be used initially at **HALF STRENGTH** for the first 24 hours. (We start at 60g powder/litre, but all brands vary, but always start at 50% or recommended concentration).

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE IS TO UNDER ESTIMATE THE CALORIE REQUIREMENTS OF THE FOAL.

For the first 1-3 days of life the foal should drink 10-15 % of its body weight over 24 hours. This increases to 25% thereafter. Remember, your replacer is giving calories and vital fluids to the foal.

The normal foal will go on suck 5-7 times an hour. It is impossible to feed the foal this often!

- Divide your total 24 hourly requirement into 12-24 feeds. Keep a chart of exactly what the foal is taking in.
- The average TB foal weighs 50kg, therefore requires 5-7.5l per 24 hours for the first 3 days of life, then 12.5l per 24 hours, divided into the smaller feeds.
- Do not make up more than 24 hours worth of milk in advance.
- For the first 2 days of life the foal will need feeding every hour.
- Then up to a week old the foal can be fed every two hours.
- From a week old to four weeks old the foal can be fed every four hours through the night.
- From 4 weeks of age onwards the foal should be getting fed 8 times a day, with the slow addition of pellets.
- Water and hay can be available from day 1.

How to make the feed?

The milk replacer must be made up

- Consistently
- Hygienically
- With no lumps
- No more than 24 hours in advance

Always used boiled water that has cooled to luke warm, rather than water from the tap. Clean all equipment in a cleaning solution such as 'Baby Milton'.



How to feed?

The decision has to be made whether to bottle feed or to get the foal onto the bucket.



For the first twenty four hours, it may well be prudent to call your vet to stomach tube the foal, once they have checked the foal over and given it a clean bill of health.

Then you can discuss with your veterinarian whether to bottle feed, bucket feed or consider fostering.

Again there are pros and cons to both techniques. Bucket feeding is easier, but less hygienic, foals are fed less often and can be over fed but the foal will be less dependent on human intervention. Bottle feeding is much more difficult and can be LIFE THREATENING if done incorrectly due to inhalation of milk into the lungs, but it is more hygienic. Foals can become 'lazy' when bottle fed and not start to eat and drink themselves. This in turn can lead to behavioural problems in the future.

To bottle feed the foal must have

- A strong suck reflex
- Be of normal mentation
- Be able to complete support itself
- Always be standing when fed, with its nose lower than the poll
- A very competent feeder

Before attempting to bottle feed, it is strongly advised that owners, if inexperienced, receive full tuition from their vet or stud manager. The most common problems are weak foals being force fed, the wrong head position, impatient feeders/handlers, and over eager foals that haven't quite got the hang of the bottle yet!

Bucket or bowl feeding is much less time consuming once the foal has learnt how to do this. **THIS IS WHAT TAKES TIME, SKILL AND PATIENCE.**

But there is a much reduced risk of aspiration onto the lungs and less bonding/behavioural problems as the foal grows up.



Courtesy of Essex horse and pony rescue

- Start with a hungry foal
- Provide warm milk in a shallow bowl
- Encourage the foal to 'play' with the milk
- Guide the foal into the milk with a teat

- Let the foal initially suck milk from the bowl through the teat

Fostering

Fostering is initially very labour intensive and requires skilled professionals and veterinary assistance, as well as a foster mare!

It may well put the foal at risk.

There are many tricks of the trade including hobbling the mare, putting 'vicks' up the mares nose, covering the orphan foal in the skin of the dead foal if the foster mare has one, the use of kick barriers, heavily sedating the mare and blindfolding the mare. All of these tricks must only be employed by skilled professionals who KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING.

Light at the end of the tunnel

Orphan foals can be weaned early from the foster mare at about 4 months of age. Ensure consistent growth in the early period of roughly 1kg/day.



A foal being weighed

Ensure that the foal is consuming at least 1kg of creep feed a day prior to weaning. If the foal is being hand reared then slowly decrease the concentration and volume of milk replacer being fed.

GOOD LUCK!!!!