

# Ask A Vet: Attending the Birth of a Foal

*Sunday, February 2, 2014*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Last spring I had my mare bred in March to a beautiful bay stallion. I'm nervous about being able to be there when she foals. How can I know when she will go into labor?

Dear Reader,

The birth of a foal is the culmination of lots of hard work and eleven months of anticipation. It is natural to want to be there when your mare decides that it is time to deliver her little one. Most equine births (greater than 90%) happen without mishap, but when things go wrong, they tend to go wrong in a big way. By attending the birth you can make the difference between a healthy colt and one that does not survive.

Normal gestation (pregnancy) in horses varies from about 320 days to 350 days. However, normal foals have been delivered from 305 to 365 days or more. Foals under 300 days of gestation are almost always non-viable. Those 305 to 320 days are considered premature and may need intensive hospital like care to survive. Because of this variability, there is no definitive length to a particular mare's gestation. Each mare can be different and individual mares may vary the length of their pregnancies from year to year. This makes it impossible to predict foaling based on gestational length.

There are some physical changes in the mare that can give clues that a birth is close. The abdomen will enlarge, of course but some mares "hide" the pregnancy more than others. Udder development might start as early as a month prior or just a few days before parturition. The udder will gradually fill with a clear, thick fluid which becomes white milk. A few days or hours before birth, this milk will turn to sticky, yellow colostrum. A hard, waxy substance will appear at the end of most mare's teats just prior to foaling. This is called "waxing" and some will say that a foal is less than 24 hours away at that point. But, I have seen many mares wax for a week or more before foaling. Other physical changes include the lengthening of a mare's vulva and the area around the vulva relaxing. To each side of the tail head, ligaments of the pelvis will relax and sink in to accommodate the foal as it passes through the birth canal.

Alternatively, several aids have been developed to help you monitor the mare when her time is close. One of the most widely used is the Foal-Alert system. This consists of a transmitter sutured into the vulva of the mare. When the mare gives birth, the two parts of the transmitter come apart and a radiofrequency signal is sent to a receiver alerting you to the birth in progress. A similar system uses a belt strapped around the mare's withers. When she lays flat on her side for a set amount of time, the transmitter in the belt assumes she is in active labor and sends out a signal. Remember, you still must be close enough to the mare to get back to her quickly if something goes wrong.

-Dr. Wade Hammond