

Looking after your new foal

Provide a safe place to be born

Many studs have lost foals due to infection or injury during or soon after birth, so it's worth considering agisting your mare at a stud at least a month out if you don't have your own foaling paddock. A clean, grassy paddock with foal-safe fencing is a safer place to give birth than most stables, which harbour bacteria and have little room to lie down. It should be easily seen from the house or close enough to use a foaling monitor, which sounds an alarm when the mare lies down. Once she's getting close to her due date or showing signs of waxing, your mare should be on her own but within sight of her mates.

The first hour of life

The birth of your new foal is exciting, but it's an anxious time for your mare, so give her space and watch quietly from a distance if you're lucky enough to see it. The foal's front hooves should appear first, followed by a nose. Anything else requires intervention (see below). Once out, and the membranes are off its face, the foal will lie on the ground with the exhausted mare bonding with her. If your mare accepts it, you can slowly approach to disinfect the foal's naval and even 'imprint' it with gentle handling. Let the foal struggle to its feet then, to clear the lungs and get its heart going, but you can guide it gently to the teat or hold the mare if it's having trouble. That first feed of colostrum is critical.

When things go wrong

Most times, all goes well if you've done the right things in caring for and accommodating your mare. But, occasionally, a foal can get stuck, suffocate in a long delivery, or be born sick or even dead. Make sure you know how things should go, so that you can tell when something's not quite right. It's also important that you know who you can call for advice, even at 2am! If all goes to plan, the birth will be over in about 20 minutes, which means most vets would never make it there to help if something's wrong. You need to be prepared to intervene yourself, so prepare a kit and have it ready by the door.

Looking after a new foal

Even if all goes well at the birth, foals are very vulnerable to injury and illness in their first few days. Getting a vet out to check your new foal and mare within 24 hours is a good idea if you're new to breeding horses. They can check that your foal is okay and take a blood sample to make sure it got enough colostrum. They can also check that the mare hasn't suffered any complications from either tearing or retaining part of the placenta, which you should try to collect in a bucket after the birth for inspection.

Taking care of your broodmare and foal

For a few months after the foal's birth, you need to keep up the same level of feed and supplements as the last three months of her pregnancy. After that, she will start sharing her feed with the foal. She'll also need free access to plenty of fresh water and good, green grass (or lucerne hay if grazing is limited) to produce milk. Regular feeding, grooming and handling of the mare help introduce these things (and you as a handler) to the foal, which is important as it will need vaccination and worming from 4 weeks old.