

Foaling season is now in full swing here in Oklahoma. In order to better prepare you for your new arrival, here are some tips on normal foal development and behavior in the first 24 hours of life.

Following the birthing, a foal should stand within 30-60 minutes and should be nursing by 2 hours of age. Once the foal has learned to nurse, it should continue to nurse 5-10 times per hour.

If the foal is not able to stand within an hour or nursing within two hours, consult your veterinarian as this may be a sign of illness. Common illnesses of newborn foals include sepsis (bacteria in the bloodstream) and neonatal maladjustment or “dummy foal syndrome” (which causes behavioral abnormalities including difficulty nursing).

The first milk that comes out of a mare’s udder is called colostrum, which is antibody-rich milk. Unlike other species, the foal receives no antibodies across the placenta during pregnancy and relies entirely upon colostrum for protection from disease. Peak absorption of colostrum occurs at 4-12 hours after birth, so it is critical that the foal be nursing well early in life.

Once your foal is one day old and colostrum has been absorbed, it is important to have your veterinarian examine the foal and measure your foal’s antibody levels. If antibody levels are low, the foal may require a plasma transfusion to improve immunity. Foals without good immunity may acquire bacterial infections more easily, which then usually requires intensive medical care. In addition to ensuring adequate colostrum ingestion, it is important to maintain a clean environment around your foal to prevent infection. This includes washing your hands before and after handling your foal, maintaining a clean stall/foaling area, keeping the mare’s udder clean, and disinfecting the umbilicus (once shortly after birth, then twice a day for the first three days of life).

Foals normally urinate shortly after nursing. Lack of urination, production of small amounts of urine, straining to urinate, or urination out of the umbilicus may indicate illness which warrants a veterinarian’s attention. Furthermore, a red or swollen umbilicus may indicate an umbilical infection which needs immediate attention.

Your foal should start to pass meconium (which is firm or pelleted dark green to black feces) within a few hours of birth and should have normal, pasty, light brown/yellow milk feces by 24 hours of age.

If you have not seen milk feces by one day of age, or if you notice your foal straining to defecate, this may indicate that your foal has a meconium impaction, another condition which requires medical attention.

In conclusion, close monitoring and early intervention are important in order to ensure a healthy, happy new foal!

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Veterinary Hospital. The large volume of questions does not allow us to directly respond to specific email questions so please watch for your answer in the column. Email your questions for the column to dvmoncall@postoffice.cvhs.okstate.edu and watch for your answer.