

## Surviving Foaling Frenzy

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'Tis the season for the foaling! It's spring, (or it will be someday) so lots of mares have already had their babies and proud owners are shooting up their digital memory cards so they'll have plenty of photographs to email around and brag about. Your own mare is entering her nineteenth month of pregnancy (you and your vet may disagree on this point, but who has to live with her?) and you anticipate appearance of the new arrival almost any time. Whether this is your first or

you haven't had a foal in a while, hopefully this article will help you get keep yourself together and bring the event off as trouble-free as possible.

Yeah. Right.

When you bred your mare last spring (or the spring before – whenever) foaling seemed too far in the future to even think about. You knew your mare was pregnant so you treated her like an expectant mother – you cooked for her, cleaned her stall a dozen times a day and hand-laundered her blankies and wraps. Then you began to wonder if you needed to have the vet check her because she just didn't "look" pregnant. You waited. Finally you began to notice she was getting a little fuller in the middle, and lying down to sleep more. She laid her ears back when you tightened the girth. She developed a taste for Krispy Kreme doughnuts and frozen enchiladas. Now she threatens to call her lawyer at the sight of a saddle. She's definitely pregnant and you're absolutely certain she's going to foal sometime in this decade. Now what do you do?

As her time draws closer, you might want to consider making some preparations. In fact, a "Foaling Kit" is a really good idea. Besides having all the necessities organized and in one place when needed, it'll give you something to do while you wait. A "Foaling Kit" can be as simple as a bottle of iodine in a bucket, or as elaborate as your imagination can make it. If this is your first attempt at putting together a "Foaling Kit," I'd like to offer a few suggestions.

For the first-time foal-expectant human, I recommend taking a day off work to prepare your "Foaling Kit." Plan a nice outing, and ask a friend to go along. You'll have several stops to make, and you'll enjoy the company. You can treat yourselves to a nice lunch, and think up baby names. Make a careful list the night before of what you'll need - write very clearly because you're likely to be overcome by excitement and you don't want to have to decipher your own handwriting when shopping for something vital.

The first thing you need is something to organize and store your "Foaling Kit" in. Experienced "human foal-parents" have had success with items such as a Hefty Bag, or one of those nice five-gallon buckets with lids like some brands of vitamins come in. If this is your first, don't try to cram everything you need in one of those type containers. Buy one of those beautiful custom tack trunks. They're big enough to hold everything you'll need, plus you can get coordinating stall drapes and towels and luggage afterward. Anticipating this, be sure and drive the truck when you go "Foaling Kit" shopping.

With your container ready, it's time to start putting in the necessities. I recommend starting with the following: 2 large bags Chips Ahoy cookies, 2 2lb. bags M&Ms, 1 large bag potato chips (your favorite), a bag of large marshmallows, several rolls of cookie dough, your local PizzalNAMinit phone number, fully-charged cell phone (for calling PizzalNAMinit), five- and ten-dollar bills and loose change (for paying PizzalNAMinit) and several 3 liter bottles of Diet Coke (you have to watch your sugar intake at a time like this). It's perfectly all right to store all the food items in a container in the barn; your mare will foal during an unexpected blizzard so it will be cold enough to keep these items without fear of spoilage.

"But I live in Florida! And it's June!" you say. Doesn't matter. Expect a crowd of surly citrus growers at your barn on the night of the blessed event. All of Florida will be under six inches of snow and they'll hold you responsible.

Next, a nice makeover and massage would be a great idea. After all, your mare would want you to be completely stress-free and relaxed when the Little One shows up, wouldn't she? You would not want to disappoint the little mother, now would you? Just think how relaxed and ready you will be after a good facial, manicure, and pedicure. And

a nice new designer handbag would hold all your small necessities for the event perfectly – phone, change, crystal-encrusted browband for the Little One's bridle...

Now that the important items have been chosen and purchased, let's get to the things your mare will need. First, a tail wrap. Elastic bandaging wrap (in her favorite color) or a plain track bandage will do nicely. Some people will tell you the purpose of wrapping a mare's tail is to keep it out of the way during foaling, and to help keep it a little cleaner. I suppose there's some validity to that. Mostly the purpose of wrapping her tail is to give the owner something to do. Wrapping tails is a particularly good distraction for owners, because you can check them every thirty seconds. One note of warning: after you've checked the wrap the first 100 times, it's a good idea to start standing pretty far to the side when checking it. Your mare may feel the need to give you what she may feel is a well-deserved kick. Please try and understand how she feels. Mares do not realize they absolutely cannot foal unless you are standing behind them with a catcher's mitt.

Back to the items that should be in your foaling kit. Several towels are a good idea. Clean ones, please. In fact, some "expectant foal-parents" find it's best to just buy four or five new ones. That way, the newborn has his own towels and won't ever have to share with anyone else. And no one else will ever have to share with him. Some people take a certain comfort in knowing their towel has never been used by a wet, sticky newborn foal. (I know. I can't understand it either.)

The famous (or infamous) bottle of iodine cannot be left out. A large bottle of iodine can be purchased at your local tack shop. As for the wide-mouthed jar, like a baby food jar, to dip the navel stump: forget it. If you think for one moment you are going to get iodine on that baby's belly and not get any on yourself, you are living in a dream world! Besides, it's such fun when people say, "My goodness, what happened to your hand? And your arm? And your FACE!" to be able to grin and reply, "Oh, nothing. My mare had a foal the other night and I spilled a little iodine." They'll be interested, so you'll launch into a two-hour dissertation on foaling which will eventually make them look around for something to stick in their eye.

A flashlight is a must. You don't want to turn on the barn lights and cause the baby to jump back in if he's been peeking out and considering making an appearance. Besides, without a flashlight you might stumble in the dark barn and fall and knock yourself unconscious and miss everything. Buy extra batteries.

Your local tack shop will probably have foaling announcements. They usually come in packages of eight or ten, with envelopes. Buy two. You can spend the waiting time addressing the envelopes and filling in all the information except the date and whether it is a colt or filly. If you cannot find foaling announcements, just pick up a couple of packs of baby announcements at your local greeting card shop. Be sure and cross out "boy" and "girl" and write in "colt" or "filly." Otherwise, it startles a recipient to find out you've had a 95 lb baby.

Be sure to get a big pink or blue bow for your mailbox. Or get one of each. What's really fun is if you have two mares that foal within a month or two of each other, and you get a colt and a filly. It startles passing motorists to see a pink bow on your mailbox only a short time after seeing a blue one.

Be careful with "It's A Boy" or "It's A Girl" balloons in the barn. Some mares are firmly convinced balloons are aliens that have come to earth to round up all the horses and take them to some strange planet where they'll become school mounts for spoiled eight-year-olds.

Don't forget a baby halter. They come in pink and blue, and have a little strap hanging from the bottom, theoretically for ease of catching the newborn once his legs start working. Don't be misled by this strap. Its actual purpose is so the newborn can drag you around the pasture. Which color should you buy? That's easy; buy one of each. Keep the color you need, and give the other one to a friend who may not be as well prepared as you when their mare foals.

Write down your vet's phone number in a conspicuous place – such as on the inside wall of your barn with a can of Day-Glo spray paint. I don't care how long you've had his or her number memorized, you will forget it. It's important to be able to reach your vet in case of emergency, such as getting up and down repeatedly after contractions begin, and nothing happening, or obvious abdominal distress unrelated to foaling. If you experience either of these symptoms, call your vet immediately. He'll want to know so he can call all your friends so they can laugh at you.

Your farrier's number is not really necessary – few mares feel the sudden need for shoes right after foaling. Of course, if she feels very strongly about shoes, I would certainly recommend giving her whatever she wants.

It is always helpful to know the signs that foaling is imminent. Any good book on horse care will include this information, or your vet will be more than happy to discuss it with you. Basically, when you see a hoof emerge from under the mare's tail, you can be pretty sure she will foal within the next month or so. There are other signs, such as the worst rainstorm in fifty years blowing up at 8 pm, or an unexpected visit from relatives you haven't seen in twenty years, or your appendix rupturing at midnight, but the hoof test is really the only 100% reliable one I've found.

The "waxing over" thing is an okay "sign" – if your mare's udder is a little waxy, you can assume she will foal sometime. That should narrow it down a bit for you, anyway.

Your mare's personality is a good indicator of how easy or difficult the birth will be. If she is a timid, nervous mare who shies at everything, she will foal quickly and easily with no problems. If she's a sturdy, no-nonsense honest mare who'll take you through a mine field and never blink at the explosions, the foal will be born upside down and sideways.

When the moment arrives, please resist the urge to grab the foal's front legs and yank it out to find out what it is. If you do, then you must resist the impulse to shove it back in and ask the mare to work on it a little longer. Foals in the process of being born may not look like your mental picture of a brand-new equine baby, especially if you've never seen one. Their ears are wet and folded back against their heads, and they have a facial expression which tells you exactly what they are thinking: "I have absolutely no idea what is happening to me, but when I get myself together, I'm sure I won't like it."

When the foal is completely out, try to refrain from gathering it in your arms and running to the house with it to raise it yourself. It's a major temptation, I know, but pretty soon it's going to realize how hungry it is and it's going to want a meal. Then what are you going to do? Better to leave it with its mother, at least for six months or so. Then it's yours forever.

Friends and family are going to want to come over to see the new arrival. If you can get them to wait a day or so, your mare will really appreciate it. Having a baby is strenuous business, and she needs a little time to recover. A good spa day would certainly be nice at this point. (You would probably like one too.) And the baby needs some time to get his eyes working. He may not recognize someone he's already met if he didn't see them well the first time. And he'll want to make sure no one uses his towels.

Foaling can be a messy business. Waiting a day or two before allowing visitors gives you time to clean up the gruesome remains of the event. You certainly don't want visitors viewing the horrible, graphic mess in the barn. Empty pizza boxes, cookie and M&M bags, and soda bottles scattered about detract from the professional image you work so hard to maintain.

So your long-awaited baby is on the ground (or standing up). Congratulations! What are you going to do with it? Do you remember saying nineteen months ago when you first bred your mare, "I can always sell the baby and get my stud fee back, at least."? Okay, so write the ad. What are you waiting for? Write it now and maybe you can sell that foal by weaning time.

Oh, what the heck. You can always decide about selling it later. In fact, it's such a nice baby! Did you remember to call the stallion owners and tell them it had been born? No? Then take a good long look at it so you can describe it exactly. Be sure and look closely at its perfect head, and shoulder angle. That stallion sure did cross well with your mare, didn't he? In fact, maybe the stallion owner would be willing to make you a deal on a repeat breeding! Why not! After all, you've got your "Foaling Kit" container and you survived foaling once! Go for it!

*One word of warning: When PizzalnAMinit arrives with your pizza, don't take your eyes off the mare for a minute while paying for it. Many unsuspecting owners have blithely tripped outside to get their pizza and returned to the barn five minutes later to find the mare smirking and the foal trying to saddle himself to go for his first outing. Besides being disappointed that you missed the whole thing, you'll forget about your pizza and the dogs will get it. Then you'll have to call PizzalnAMinit again and wait another two hours!*