Feeding Orphan Foals (AAEP 2012)

It's an unfortunate reality that at one time or another, most veterinarians and breeders will face caring for an orphan foal. It's not always easy, but with some thought and planning, it can be done successfully. "It's a lesson in life," said presenter Dr. Christine Paradis, with the Animal Health Trust in Newmarket, UK. "If it's done right, foals can thrive and prosper."

Feeding Orphan Foals

Paradis recommended bucket feeding as a more practical alternative. She said this method is less time consuming, more hygienic, and can be used for bottle feeding. Bucket feeding is less stressful for mares, because it's a more natural method of feeding. It helps to promote normal behavior and reduces stress on the foal. It's also important to offer orphan foals water, hay, and pellets early in life, options they would encounter if they were reared naturally.

"A lot of new owners are very concerned about what food to feed the foal," Paradis said, but it has its drawbacks, including an increased risk of developing aspiration pneumonia, an increased human/foal bond issues than bottle feeding, and most foals learn quickly how to drink from the bucket ("Be prepared to be covered in milk!!"). Finally, Paradis said, be aware of several potential complications when grafting an orphan foal to a nurse mare: constipation and metabolic acidosis, infections, and malnutrition.

In the end, it is important to remember that the goal is to give the foal a chance at normality. "It's nice if it's all natural," Paradis said, "but it's important to be realistic."

Paradis also noted that grafting foals to hormone induced lactating mares can be challenging, and she offered two suggestions that have worked for her. One is to have an experienced vet or nurse attend the introduction, and the other is to keep the foal in a small box during meals to protect the mare. "It's very important to have a plan," Paradis said. "The more you know, the better your chances are of success."

"If an owner does not acquire a surrogate mare, there are several different ways to feed an orphan. Bottle feeding is a common method, but it can be time consuming and stressful for the foal and the owner. But if it's done right, foals can thrive and prosper," Paradis said.

Proper Diet

Feeding Methods

It's also important to offer orphan foals water, hay, and pellets early in life, options they would encounter if they were reared naturally. "It can be a good idea to mix the hay and the pellets with the milk replacer before feeding, so the foal can get used to the consistency," Paradis said. "But be aware that some foals prefer milk replacers over milk pellets, and these can be made into a mash if the foal prefers.

Paradis recommended bucket feeding as a more practical alternative. She said this method is less time consuming, more hygienic, and can be used for bottle feeding. Bucket feeding is less stressful for mares, because it's a more natural method of feeding. It helps to promote normal behavior and reduces stress on the foal. It's also important to offer orphan foals water, hay, and pellets early in life, options they would encounter if they were reared naturally.

But if it's done right, foals can thrive and prosper. "The important thing is to give them a chance at normality," Paradis said. "It's important to be realistic."

Paradis also noted that grafting foals to hormone induced lactating mares can be challenging, and she offered two suggestions that have worked for her. One is to have an experienced vet or nurse attend the introduction, and the other is to keep the foal in a small box during meals to protect the mare. "It's very important to have a plan," Paradis said. "The more you know, the better your chances are of success."

If an owner decides to use a nurse mare, Paradis said he or she should seek the following qualities: The mare should have a good history of nursing, be healthy and show no signs of disease, and be young. "The mare should also be large enough to handle the foal," Paradis said. "It's also important to have a plan for the foal's introduction to the mare, and to have a back-up plan in case things don't go as planned."

If an owner decides to bottle feed the foal, Paradis said it's important to offer the foal water, hay, and pellets early in life, options they would encounter if they were reared naturally. "It's important to offer the foal these options, because they would be encountered if they were reared naturally," Paradis said. "It's also important to offer the foal water, hay, and pellets early in life, options they would encounter if they were reared naturally."

Paradis said the research team is hoping that "a large number of owners will consider the option of adopting an orphan foal, and that more orphan foals will be successfully reared in the future."