Auscultable (audible using a stethoscope) fluid in the foal's larynx or trachea during or after nursing.

Dribbling milk from the mouth; and

Coughing during or immediately after nursing;

Respiratory distress, which usually appears as a coughing sound or as a loud snorting noise;

Swallowing is weak or absent, which can be assessed by observing the foal's head and neck movement during nursing.

A typical dysphagic foal will exhibit a few clinical signs, Buechner said. "These signs may include a weak swallow, head flinching, and/aspirating milk into the lungs, or a complete refusal to attempt to nurse." In foals that are otherwise relatively healthy, a veterinarian can place a feeding tube from birth. Although foals often need this parenteral nutrition in the early stages of treatment, enteral nutrition provides a more balanced way to feed sick foals. Thus, at this time, Buechner recommended preparing food for three to four feedings, adding warm water, and feeding via a feeding tube.

Preparing Milk or Milk Replacer

Buechner explained that preparing the milk or replacer is crucial to the feeding process. She stressed that all instruments used to prepare the milk or replacer or administer it to the foal should be washed thoroughly between uses. It's also important to ensure the milk hasn't spoiled before feeding it to the foal.

Maxwell recommended preparing enough formula for three to four feedings with warm water. The milk or replacer should be marked with a date and time. It's also important to heat the replacer slowly, as well, and only reheat stored milk once, discarding a "sour" or spoiled milk replacer.

Maxwell also stressed that all instruments used to prepare the milk or replacer or administer it to the foal should be washed thoroughly between uses. It's also important to ensure the milk hasn't spoiled before feeding it to the foal.

"Although food entering the gut is not sterile, it is important to maintain cleanliness and not overburden the neonatal gut with too much nutrition," Maxwell said. "To avoid this, the area in which the foal's diet is prepared should be 'kitchen' clean."

Preparing the feeding bag and collecting milk or replacer is an especially important step to prevent contamination. Depending on the location of the foal in the nursery, the veterinarian may need to transport the foal to a central location to collect milk. If a foal does not successfully absorb the milk replacer, the milk should be collected for the next feeding. The foal should be tested for streptococcus and other gram-negative bacteria that can cause inflammation in the gut. The spleen may also be enlarged due to sepsis.

Endoscopy is a very important tool for examining the foal's gut and determining if he is a candidate for eventual enteral nutrition. Thus, at this time, Buechner recommended providing nutritional support using the feeding tube. However, endoscopy should be used to evaluate if the foal has a problem with the gut as well as the swallow reflex. Recomprehensive evaluation and treatment of the foal's gut motility and healing status will help determine if the foal's swallow reflex resolves.

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