Between life and death for your new arrival, watch for, understanding how to manage them, and knowing when to call a veterinarian can mean the difference.

Tiny foals can have some big health problems. When you're expecting a foal, knowing what health problems to be on hand to prevent, recognize, and treat is essential.

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Veterinarians can successfully manage most foals with meconium impactions medically, Barr said; however, early recognition and intervention can improve the foal's chances of survival.

Intravenous fluids and pain management are keys to survival. From 1990 to 1995, 72% of septic foals treated at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine survived. From 1996 to 2000, 87% survived. The difference was due to improvements in treatment and our understanding of genetics. In 2011, the University of Kentucky claimed 100% survival for all septic foals treated using a new protocol combining antibiotics, IV fluids, and pain management.

Veterinarians diagnose meconium impactions using a combination of the foal's history, abdominal ultrasound, and X-rays. Clinical signs can appear from the time a foal is a few hours old to when he's a few days old and include:

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- Depression;
- Tail swishing; 
- An excessive amount of meconium; 
- Abnormal breathing patterns; and 
- Hyperresponsiveness (an abnormal degree of responsiveness to stimuli). 

Sepsis is a systemic inflammatory response in the presence of or as a result of a suspected or diagnosed infection. While sepsis can be considered a disease, it's a more serious clinical condition. Sepsis does not always occur if a foal has an infection. Rather, it's an inflammatory response that can be triggered by infections that may or may not be diagnosed. 

Ingestion failure — when the foal's system isn't able to absorb the colostrum consumed — is the most common cause of sepsis. Failure of passive transfer (or FPT) is the most common immunodeficiency in newborn foals. This occurs when the foal's system isn't able to absorb the colostrum consumed.

There are, however, a few predisposing factors that could indicate a potential problem.

Affected foals also can develop renal (kidney) and GI issues, Barr said. Renal problems are often subtle and may not be recognized.

Central nervous system signs include:

- Hypoxic (foal was deprived of oxygen), such as a red bag delivery or dystocia. But, not all dummy foals had a history of a red bag delivery. Moreover, not all dummy foals developed hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy, and "dummy foal" syndrome, among others.

Neonatal Encephalopathy

- Mental retardation;
- Developmental delay;
- Learning difficulties; and 
- Motor abnormalities. 

Neonatal Encephalopathy can reduce their foals' risk of developing diseases, including:

- Sepsis;
- Inflammation; 
- Organ dysfunctions; and 
- Immune system dysfunction. 

Clinical signs of neonatal sepsis are widely variable, but include lethargy and weakness. 

Although it's difficult to prevent FPT altogether, breeders can take steps to minimize the chance of it occurring, Barr said.

 Veterinarians typically administer frozen colostrum or colostrum replacer if the foal is less than 12 hours old. For foals that have missed the "oral window," veterinarians generally use intravenous therapy with immunoglobulin, PEG, and other supplements to support their immune system.

Ingestion failure can be so severe that the foal is unable to consume colostrum at all. When this happens, veterinarians will attempt to improve the foal's gut motility through medication. If the foal is still unable to feed, veterinarians may provide intravenous feeding.

Production failure involves a lack of colostrum production. Colostrum production is usually a result of fetal development and maturity, delivery, or the peripartum period may result in severe neonatal illness. 

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Predisposing Factors

- Infections;
- Infertility;
- Delivery complications;
- Hypothermia; and 
- Anemia. 

Foal Health Concerns

Even if foals appear healthy, a veterinarian should examine them shortly after birth to ensure there are no signs of disease.

Once a foal is born, it's important to determine whether he's acting normally or if there might be something wrong. 

At the 2014 Kentucky Breeders' Short Course, held Feb. 8 in Lexington, Bonnie Barr, VMD, Dipl. ACVIM, an equine internist, discussed several common health problems newborn foals are susceptible to.

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Finally, Barr described meconium impactions.

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