How to Feed an Orphan Foal

When a mare is bred, her caretakers typically aren’t thinking about how they’ll raise her foal should something happen to her. But unfortunately, orphaned foals are a breeding reality that all caretakers should consider. At the 2012 Western Veterinary Conference, held Feb. 19 through Feb. 22 in Anaheim, Calif., the topic of orphan feed was an important one. TheHorse.com’s Carol Clark, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, of Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, Fla., discussed the topic with attendees and shared her knowledge on the subject.

Colostrum

The first thing any foal needs to consume is the mare’s colostrum, explained Clark, a practitioner at Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, Fla. “Colostrum, or ‘first milk’ as some call it, is the thick, yellow secretion from the mammary gland that’s present immediately after birth,” Clark relayed. “It’s advisable, if multiple mares foal on a particular farm or if breeding is an annual occurrence, to collect some colostrum within two hours of birth. She also noted owners can use hyperimmune blood plasma in the event colostrum isn’t available.

In the event colostrums aren’t immediately available, Clark recommends feeding the foal milk or milk replacer (more on that in a bit) within the first hour of life, followed by milk replacer between 2 and 4 hours after birth. She also noted colostral quality greatly affects this, and adequate (antibody levels) can be achieved with less,” Clark said. “Usually 1 to 1.5 liters total is enough for the first week’s feeding. However, if the mare has been pregnant for the third time or more, the foal might not get enough colostrum. For those cases, three liters total might be necessary.”

Milk

“Mare’s milk is best,” Clark said. Understanding that acquiring mare’s milk isn’t always feasible, she recommended either goat’s milk or a specific, acidified milk replacer. Initially, the foal should be fed via a bottle, she said, but can consume milk pellets before being transitioned to growth pellets.

Solid Food and Forage

She recommended feeding both milk pellets and growth formulas according to label instructions, and to gradually replace the foal’s milk diet with the growth diet over the first few days. Once the foal is consuming milk pellets before being transitioned to growth pellets, time. Foals should not consume more than 25% of their body weight daily, she noted.

Clark recommends feeding about 15% of the foal’s body weight on the first day, and increasing that amount to 18% by the second day. “The feeding can be gradually decreased to four times daily through two months of age, and even less over time. Initially, the foal should be fed at least every two hours for at least a few days before decreasing to every three hours through two months of age and even less over time. Foals should not consume more than 25% of their body weight daily, she noted.

“Self-serve Nursing”

In 1991, Stan Gifford, a veterinary technician at Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital, invented a method of feeding orphan foals whereby the foal’s calorie intake is increased through self-feeding. “I’ve discovered that when foals are taught to use the nipple bucket as early as possible, they will self-feed,” Clark said. “This allows orphan foals to consume milk pellets before being transitioned to growth pellets.”

Clark also recommended covering the top of the bucket to prevent contamination. “Using an acidified commercial mare’s milk replacer has the advantage of remaining fresh for up to 24 hours at room temperature,” Clark said. “‘Buckets with lamb sized nipples attached work very well and can be used to set up a self-serve nursing station’ in case it’s needed in the future.”

For Foals Not Being Fed the Right Way

“The foal might exhibit loose stool as he ingests more milk or replacer, Clark cautioned. In these cases, feed smaller, more frequent meals and consider a gastrointestinal tract absorbent for serious cases, she said. She encouraged veterinary attendees to make use of powder-type absorbents, such as kaolin, pectin, or bentonite.”

Nutritional Considerations

Nutritional needs for the foal change with time and as he transitions into solid feeding. The foal should be fed the correct diet for his specific age and size, and a veterinarian should be consulted to determine the foal’s nutritional needs. Some foals might not be able to consume the milk and replacer replacement due to ulcers. In these cases, milk replacer containing hydrogenated soybean oil should be used, and the foal should be closely monitored for weight gain. She also recommended ulcer treatments until the foals have become accustomed to their diets.

Final Thoughts

Clark relayed that she has taught foals how to use the nipple bucket, and “initially the foal should be fed at least every two hours for at least a few days before decreasing to every three hours through two months of age and even less over time. Foals should not consume more than 25% of their body weight daily, she noted.”

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