

How to Feed an Orphan Foal

By [Erica Larson, News Editor](#)

Updated: Wednesday, May 22, 2013 1:00 PM

Posted: Monday, May 14, 2012 12:00 AM

Originally published on [TheHorse.com](#)

Editor's note: This article is part of TheHorse.com's ongoing coverage of topics presented at the 2012 Western Veterinary Conference held in February.

When a mare is bred, her caretakers typically aren't thinking about how they'll raise her foal should something happen to her during parturition. But unfortunately, orphaned foals are a breeding reality that all caretakers should consider. At the 2012 Western Veterinary Conference, held Feb. 19-23 in Las Vegas, Nev., Carol Clark, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, discussed the important aspects of feeding orphan foals.

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 that contains concentrated antibodies that help protect the foal against infectious diseases.

Orphan foals are no exception. Prior to foaling, find a local colostrum bank that can provide fresh or frozen first milk for foals in need. "Usually 1 to 1.5 liters total--divided into multiple 8 to 12 ounce feedings--of colostrums is needed to achieve an (acceptable antibody level), but colostral quality greatly affects this, and adequate (antibody levels) can be achieved with less," Clark said.

In the event colostrums aren't immediately available, Clark recommends feeding the foal milk or milk replacer (more on that in a moment) within two hours of birth. She also noted owners can use hyperimmune blood plasma in the event colostrum isn't available.

"Self-Serve" Nursing?

When a foal is on a mare's side, he eats whenever his little heart desires. What if there was a way to provide this luxury to orphans? According to Carol Clark, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, of Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, Fla., a "self-serve nursing station" is an option for orphan foals.

"If the foal has been taught to use the nipple bucket, they can self-feed," Clark said. "(Milk or milk replacer) just needs to be provided for them on a regular basis.

"Buckets with lamb sized nipples attached work very well and can be used to set up a self-serve situation," she said. Typically, she noted, nursing buckets come with a calf nipple, but these can be easily replaced with one designed for lambs, which fit better into a foal's small mouth.

"Using an acidified commercial mare's milk replacer has the advantage of remaining fresh for up to 24 hours at room temperature without spoilage," Clark added.

She also recommended covering the top of the bucket to prevent contamination.

--Erica Larson

It's advisable, if multiple mares foal on a particular farm or if breeding is an annual occurrence, to collect some colostrum from mares and [store it](#) in case it's needed in the future.

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 commercially available foal-specific, acidified milk replacer. Initially, the foal should be fed via a bottle, she said, but can transition to bucket feeding over the first few days.

"Initially, the foal should be fed at least every two hours for at least a few days before decreasing to every three hours through the first few weeks," Clark relayed. "The feeding can be gradually decreased to four times daily through two months of age, and even less often in the third month."

Clark recommends feeding about 15% of the foal's body weight on the first day, and increasing that amount to 18-22% over the next week's time. Foals should not consume more than 25% of their body weight daily, she noted.

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 prophylactic anti-ulcer treatments until the foals have become accustomed to their diets.

Foals should always have access to fresh water, she added.

Solid Food and Forage

"Milk pellets, hay, and concentrate growth formula feeds can be offered after about two weeks of age," Clark said, noting that most foals consume milk pellets before being transitioned to growth pellets.

She recommended feeding both milk pellets and growth formulas according to label instructions, and to gradually replace the foal's milk diet with these solids by about three months of age.

The Buddy System

Finally, although not necessarily related to feeding, Clark recommended providing orphan foals with a buddy to help reduce stress and provide companionship. She suggested another orphan foal, an older mare or quiet horse, or a goat as examples of possible friends.

Take-Home Message

While raising and feeding an orphaned foal is something few caretakers ever hope to face, it's important to know what to do in case the situation arises. Work with your veterinarian to ensure your orphan receives the proper nutrition and is in otherwise good health. With time, dedication, and proper nutrition, orphan foals can grow up to lead productive lives, just like any other foal.

Disclaimer: Seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian before proceeding with any diagnosis, treatment, or therapy.