



Fostering a Foal

With many new born animals, for example dairy calves, it would be common for them to be bucket reared on artificial milk powder. Orphan foals however benefit hugely from being reared by a foster mare, both in terms of behaviour and social development, as well as meeting their nutritional needs.

In the early weeks of life foals feed very frequently and bucket, or bottle rearing a foal is very time consuming. In contrast, fostered foals can live a more normal life with their new mother; they benefit from feeding when they need to and being able to be turned out as part of a herd.

Reasons to foster a foal

Loss of mare

The commonest reason for needing to find a foster mare is the tragic loss of a mare at or soon after foaling, either as a complication of foaling or following colic or other illness, injury or disease.

Mare rejection of foal

This is reasonably common in maiden mares, i.e. those which have not foaled before. Some maiden mares will attack a foal when it tries to feed. Other mares are too anxious to let the foal feed, or will not stand to let the foal suck.

Mare unable to feed foal

Some mares may not produce sufficient or even any milk. Fortunately this is relatively rare, but may be the result of previous mastitis. It is also possible that the mare may be ill or injured, which would in itself reduce milk production.

FINDING A FOSTER MARE:

- the National Foal Bank, run for many years by Johanna Vardon, is a mine of information and advice (01952 811234);
- local equine veterinary surgeons & stud farms;
- social media e.g. facebook appeal;
- some studs keep their own foster mares, usually black and white cob mares;
- companies supplying foster mares such as Clononeen Stud (07514476317).

KEY POINTS:

- act quickly and have a plan B if unsuccessful;
- DO NOT LEAVE MARE & FOAL ALONE;
- make sure the mare is safely restrained;
- blindfold mare;
- do not allow foal to be at front end of mare;
- do not let mare sniff foal initially;
- time consuming and labour intensive initially;
- can be highly rewarding when successful and gives foal a much better chance in life.

Method for fostering

Having located a suitable foster mare:

- Decide if foal travels to mare or mare to foal. This will depend on individual situations such as location and available transport and staff to help.
- Keep foal fed and hydrated until fostering can take place. Ideally, provide alternative colostrum supply, tetanus antitoxin and antibiotic cover. Check IgG levels and give plasma transfusion if deficient.
- On attempting fostering, ensure a safe, calm environment with at least two helpers.
- Make sure mare is adequately restrained: tied up, blindfold and sedated where appropriate.
- Bring foal into mare's stable with somebody standing at mare's head.
- Bring foal to feed at same side as person holding mare so she cannot swing onto foal, ideally have straw bales or pole as barrier. Keep quiet and calm but reprimand the mare if she attempts to kick or bite the foal.
- Do not let foal come to front end of mare or let mare sniff foal at first.
- Take foal out once it has fed and ideally place in stable next to foster mare where she can hear but not see the foal.
- Repeat feeding process every two hours.
- Once/if mare is calm and accepting the foal, withdraw sedation and remove blindfold.
- Once mare starts to call for foal when brought into stable allow her to sniff foal. Ensure foal can be removed quickly if mare shows any aggression.
- Continue to keep the mare tied up and remove foal in between feeds, gradually allowing foal to remain in stable for longer periods after feeding.



If successful, this whole process will take 24-48 hours. Indicators of success are the mare and foal calling for each other and a lack of aggressive behaviour towards the foal.

If a fostering goes smoothly, mare and foal may be turned out after three days. Be sure to be clear about who is responsible for care of the mare and foal when they are not under the care of their respective owners at the beginning of the fostering process. Include points such as whether the mare is to be covered again and when the foal will be weaned.



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