

DIARRHEA IN FOALS: CAUSES, SIGNS AND CONCERNS

Diarrhea is often a problem in foals between one week and two months of age. It is often caused by the dam's foal heat, or it is due to nutritional changes. In these cases the diarrhea is usually mild and does not require veterinary management. However, more severe cases of diarrhea include those caused by parasites, viruses, and bacteria. Often times, these foals require medical care and support. As an owner it is important to know about the various causes of diarrhea and when to get veterinary assistance.

FOAL HEAT DIARRHEA

This diarrhea is usually transient and mild in nature. Generally, foals between five and 14 days of life are affected. These foals are bright, alert, active, nursing well, and have normal temperatures (99-102°). The cause of foal heat diarrhea remains unknown, although parasites, changes in the mare's milk, and the ingestion of the mare's manure have been implicated.

PARASITIC CAUSES

Strongyloides westerni is a parasite shed through the mare's milk to the foal. These foals generally develop diarrhea within the first two to four weeks of life. Treatment consists of deworming with thiabendazole, cambendazole, or ivermectin. Treating the mare with ivermectin on the day of parturition (foaling) helps prevent transmission to the foal.

Strongylus vulgaris infection in foals results in diarrhea, fever, and colic. Fecal exams are often not helpful because the clinical signs are associated with the larval migration stages before the adult worms pass eggs into the feces. Treatment consists of deworming with ivermectin.

VIRAL DIARRHEA

Rotavirus is a virus that can commonly cause diarrhea in foals from two days to five months of age. The younger foals are more severely affected. Often more than one foal on a farm is affected. The foals shed the virus in their feces and mares may shed the virus but show no signs. The virus can persist in the environment for up to nine months. Foals can become dehydrated, develop electrolyte problems, requiring both oral and intravenous fluids and sometimes antibiotics.

Your veterinarian can diagnose rotavirus by sending feces to a specialized laboratory. Prevention is now possible with the use of a new vaccine that is given to the mare during pregnancy, allowing the antibodies to then be transferred to the foal through the mare's colostrum.

BACTERIA

Salmonella is the most common cause of bacterial diarrhea in foals. Generally, affected foals are less than eight days of age. These foals become very ill, stop nursing and become weak and dehydrated. Also the bacteria can enter their blood stream and settle into the joints causing lameness. Diagnosis is made by culturing the organism from the feces. These foals need veterinary therapy, often intravenous fluids, antibiotics, and nutritional support.

There are two types of clostridium that can cause potentially fatal diarrhea in foals. Clostridium perfringens types A, B, and C affect foals less than seven days old, and especially day old foals. The diarrhea is bloody and can be diagnosed by detecting toxins in the feces. These foals are very ill and need to have veterinary attention immediately.

Clostridium difficile causes bloody diarrhea and rapid death in foals less than three days old. Again, the organism can be detected in the feces and these foals need immediate veterinary therapy.

GASTROINTESTINAL ULCERS

Ulcers can cause diarrhea in foals and can be treated with anti-ulcer medications. Diagnosis may be made from history, endoscopic exam of the stomach, or response to the therapy.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR FOAL HAS DIARRHEA

If the foal is less than three days old, stops nursing, becomes depressed, or if the diarrhea is profuse or bloody, the foal should receive **immediate** veterinary attention.

If the foal has foal heat diarrhea, or is older and has diarrhea but is bright, active, alert, and nursing, supportive care can consist of the owner monitoring the diarrhea, temperature, and attitude of the foal. The owner should keep the foal's rump clean to prevent fecal scalding. A water repellent ointment can be applied. Bismuth subsalicylate or kaolin and pectin (3-4 ounces/100 lbs orally three to four times a day) can be given. Also, oral electrolytes can be offered either by bottle or by bucket feeding. If there are any questions or concerns your veterinarian should be consulted.