

Nutritional Priorities

For the Newborn Foal



Proper growth and development of the future equine athlete begins in the womb and continues after the foal has been born. Particularly critical is during the rapid growth phases to ensure proper bone, ligament, tendon and muscle development. A strong nutritional basis as a youngster can give your future athlete a head start on those that have marginal nutrition during growth.

- Young foals rely completely on the mare to provide colostrum with antibodies and milk for nutritional needs.
- Colostrum is the “first milk” produced by the mare and it thick and yellowish and full of the mare’s antibodies that will help the foal fight off the assault of new pathogens it encounters outside the womb, as it has an immature and naïve immune system.
- The newborn should drink colostrum within two hours of its birth. There is a short window available for the digestive tract to absorb the antibodies and have them work effectively to provide immune support. From 6 hours onwards, the ability to absorb antibodies decreases until 12 to 24 hours, when it cannot absorb antibodies. Infection is the leading cause of death in newborns. The foal needs to drink about 1.5 to 2.5 liters of colostrum during this critical period.
- If the mare is dripping significant amounts of colostrum before foaling, some can be milked out and frozen to save for the foal. It should be gently thawed in warm water (not the microwave!) for bottle-feeding or by nasogastric tube by the vet if the foal has trouble nursing.
- Most of the water needs for the foal will be obtained through the milk, but dehydration is a very dangerous issue for the foal, as the immature kidneys do not concentrate the urine as well. Diarrhoea is a serious concern for the foal and must be treated promptly or dehydration will rapidly become a serious health risk. Rapid veterinary assistance is critical for the foal.
- The foal should be assessed by a veterinarian soon after birth to ensure it is healthy and IgG testing performed on all foals. Any signs of trouble nursing or standing/moving should trigger a call to the vet.
- A calm environment with minimal disruption is necessary for normal bonding between mare and foal and proper development. Leave time for Mom and baby to rest. Resist the urge to over handle the foal during this early period regardless of how cute it is!

For more information sign up for Equine Guelph’s 12 week online course on Management of the Mare, Stallion and Foal. Check the Education pages of Equine Guelph for more information.