



FOAL REJECTION

Press Release

After more than eleven months of waiting, your mare has finally delivered a fine, healthy foal. Yet shortly after the foal stands, the mare spins around, pins her ears and attacks her foal. What is happening and what can you do?

Foal rejection is a heartbreaking twist to an otherwise normal foaling and unless the mare has rejected a foal before, there is no way to predict if and when it will happen. Katherine Houpt, VMD, PhD, is a behavior specialist at Cornell University and has identified three major types of foal rejection by mares. The most common type of foal rejection is where a mare will not allow her foal to nurse. This may be due to anxiety, nervousness, fear, or discomfort. First time foaling mares may have a very painful udder. When the foal nudges the udder or attempts to suckle, the pain may cause the mare to refuse to allow the foal to nurse.

The second type of foal rejection is avoidance of the foal. Again, it often occurs with mares foaling for the first time. The mare appears to be frightened of the foal and tries to avoid it. These mares simply move away as the newborn foal stands and begins to approach the mare. The third and most serious type of rejection is where the mare shows aggression towards the foal.

Regardless of the type of rejection, it is essential to intervene if the foal is at risk.

For mares that do not allow the foal to nurse, it is critical that the foal receives colostrum (first milk) as soon as possible. The mare may need to be restrained and her colostrum harvested. The foal can then be fed with a bottle or a veterinarian may be needed to administer the colostrum via a naso-gastric tube directly into the stomach. Once the foal has received colostrum, the mare can then be worked with to try to get her to allow the foal to nurse.

Sometimes simply restraining the mare with her hindquarters backed into a corner to avoid kicking will work. Once the foal nurses and takes the pressure off of the udder, the mare is not as painful and will let the foal nurse. Mares that are more resistant may require light sedation before they will allow the foal to nurse. Administration of a medication such as Banamine® to relieve pain or discomfort may also be helpful. Consult with your veterinarian for additional information or recommendations on medical therapy. Putting a warm wet towel on the mare's udder can also relax her and get her used to having her udder handled.

These tactics can also help with mares that appear to be afraid of their foal and exhibit avoidance behavior. It is essential that all foaling personnel remain quiet and calm and avoid escalating the situation. Restrain the mare and allow the foal (with supervision) to approach the mare.

Often, once the foal starts nursing, the mare will relax and accept the foal. If the mare becomes violent towards the foal or if it is perceived that the mare may injure the foal, herself or farm personnel, she may need sedation or other forms of restraint. Again, consult with your veterinarian.

For the mare that tries to attack her foal, she will have to be put into a situation where she can't harm the foal. That might include putting her into a corner of the stall with panels so she can't kick or bite at the foal, but the foal is still in close proximity. Using grain or other reward when the mare allows the foal to approach may encourage her to associate the foal with something positive or desirable. If she shows signs of aggression when the foal approaches, she should be corrected. Patience is required, as well as consistency. Some recommend placing the placenta over the foal to stimulate the mare's recognition of the foal as her own.

Mares that have rejected a foal once are at a greater risk for rejecting a second foal. Maiden mares are more apt to reject the foal by avoidance. Arabians as a breed tend to reject foals more often than other breeds. However, foal rejection may occur in an individual mare of any breed.

As an owner, there are several things you can do to try to reduce the chances of a mare rejecting her foal. Handling her udder (i.e. massage, washing) in the weeks prior to foaling will get her used to the sensation. It has been suggested that maintaining maiden mares around experienced mares with good mothering behavior may be beneficial.

Thankfully, the overall occurrence of foal rejection is low. It is most commonly noted within the first 12 to 24 hours post-foaling. A majority of mares that initially exhibit

foal rejection behavior will 'turn around' within the first day. One can often watch instinctual maternal behavior 'kick in' after the first few hours after foaling.

Foaling is generally one of the most anticipated and happiest times on a breeding farm. A mare that rejects her foal can take that moment of euphoria away in seconds. However, with a plan of action and quick as well as calm management of the mare, she may be persuaded to change her behavior and mother her foal, as a good broodmare should.

For more information, contact the Equine Reproduction Laboratory at Colorado State University:

www.cvmb.colostate.edu/bms/ERL