



FOAL REJECTION

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Rejection of a foal by its dam can take several forms. The mare may avoid the foal, prevent the foal from nursing, or may become aggressive toward the foal. Mares in the latter category may assume a threatening posture, pin their ears back when the foal approaches, charge or chase the foal, squeal at the foal, or in more serious cases, may kick at or bite the foal. Mares have, on rare occasions, seriously injured or killed their foals in the first few days after giving birth.

Foal rejection may occur in any horse breed, including American Quarter Horses, but is most common in Arabians. Rejection is most likely to occur in mares giving birth to their first foal. Mares that have rejected a foal in the past have an increased chance of rejecting a subsequent foal. In addition, mares that are separated from their foal for a prolonged time interval in the early postpartum period have an increased risk of foal rejection.

Mares that ultimately reject their foals are not as likely to express normal maternal behaviors in the early post-partum period, such as licking their foals, nickering to their foals and standing guard over or next to their foals.

Failure to allow nursing will result in an inability of the foal to acquire the maternal

antibodies from colostrum necessary to protect itself against pathogenic disease organisms. In addition, affected foals will be deprived of important nutritional support in the neonatal period.

Although you may be exhausted from staying up nights waiting for the foal to be born, mares exhibiting a tendency toward foal rejection should be monitored closely for the first 48 hours or more after foaling. The vast majority of rejection-type behavioral interactions occur within the first 12 hours after birth. Therefore, in at-risk mares it is best to avoid interrupting the bonding that naturally occurs between mare and foal early in life.

Management of foal rejection may initially include restraint of the mare by hand, judicious use of a twitch, hobbles or cross-ties, or by placing the mare behind a bar or within a nursing chute to allow the foal to have an unimpeded opportunity to suckle. In mild cases, distraction of the mare with grain may be sufficient to allow the foal time to nurse without the mare becoming nervous and moving away. If the foal does not or cannot nurse, colostrum from the mare should be milked out and fed to the foal by bottle or by nasogastric tube.

In some instances, the mare may need to be muzzled to prevent biting of the foal. The

mare may also need to be tranquilized periodically during the first few days post partum with an medication such as acepromazine to decrease aggression. Administration of the oral progestogen Regumate[®] has also been used in many cases of foal rejection in an attempt to suppress or modulate aggressive behavior. Treatment of the mare with an analgesic, such as Banamine[®], may be indicated if the mare appears to be rejecting nursing attempts by the foal due to post-foaling pain or mammary gland discomfort. Inflammation of the mammary gland, or mastitis, may contribute to refusal of a mare to allow nursing.

If other techniques are not successful, some breeders advocate turning a mare exhibiting mild foal rejection behavior out into a paddock with her foal along with another mare and foal in the hope that natural maternal protective instincts will enhance acceptance of her own foal.

It may take several days of patient, diligent work to assist the mare to accept her foal. However, if the process is unsuccessful the foal may be fostered onto a nurse mare. Good nurse mares are not always easy to find locally, but several web sites are available that can assist in locating a suitable candidate. In addition, recent research in France has demonstrated that lactation can be hormonally stimulated in non-foaling mares to create nurse mares for orphan foals. Hand-rearing the rejected foal as an orphan is a labor intensive alternative if a nurse mare is not available.

Rejection of a foal by its biological dam is heart-wrenching to watch. Fortunately, many mares will overcome their initial avoidance or rejection behavior and eventually accept their foal. Owners need to be aware of the necessity to provide colostrum to the foal if the mare does not allow nursing in the first few hours of life.