

## FOALING: PREPARATION, BIRTH AND BEYOND

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**THE DONKEY  
SANCTUARY**

The question often asked is, “Why breed from any animal?” Sadly, for the most part, the reason is for financial gain. Given the number of species taken into care by welfare organisations in the United Kingdom, the only viable reason for breeding has to be to improve on what already exists. Having thought this through and ensured that, as far as is possible, the future of any foal is secure, thought then has to be given to breed a foal that is going to have attributes superior to its parents, thus following the theory that we should breed to improve. If an educated, well thought out decision to breed from your mare has been made (or if an in-foal jenny has come your way) the following advice will be invaluable at this special time.

### PREPARING FOR THE BIRTH

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The gestation period for a donkey can vary from 11 to 14 ½ months from the last date of service. There are different methods to diagnose an early pregnancy in jennies so please contact your vet for advice. For the majority of the pregnancy the mare will be happy with her usual routine and companions. Special attention should be paid to the existence of friendships, as separation might increase risk of anorexia/stress and lead to other problem like hyperlipemia (see 'Hyperlipaemia' info sheet). Ideally the mare should be in a good body condition before getting pregnant and she should be maintained in a good body condition (BCS 3) throughout the whole pregnancy, avoiding being under or overweight. Teeth and feet should be checked to make sure they are in good order. Consult with your vet regarding vaccinations and worming during pregnancy.

As foaling approaches she will become more solitary. Consideration should now be given to where the foal may best be born, plan for at least one month on-site prior to foaling to allow the mare to build up appropriate anti-bodies for the location. A large airy stable is preferable, disinfected and prepared with fresh straw and well banked-up around the edges. Shavings and other particle bedding is not ideal as it can be inhaled, stick to the foal, or cause problems with the foal's eyes. Hay should be offered in small quantities on the floor, with water in small shallow buckets. Please see 'Feeding Youngsters and Broodmares' for further nutritional advice or contact your vet as the energy requirements of your pregnant mare will increase in the last trimester especially and during lactation.



Remove any protruding items, check lighting is sufficient, think about installing heat lamps. It is advisable to have a discreet observation point where you can observe and monitor what is happening without upsetting the mare.

The udder will swell and subside for as long as four weeks before finally increasing in size to the stage where the teats and udder are swollen and the udder is almost indistinguishable from the teats. In the last 72 hours milk usually starts to run (this first sign can vary), if you suspect milk may be running too soon, then consult your vet as that could affect the foal's immunity

once born if there is not enough colostrum. It might be prudent to collect some milk off for freezing if your vet advises to do so. During the final 48 hours the pelvic muscles will slacken and the hindquarters will lose muscle tone. 'Waxing up' or oozing waxy colostrum from the teats can be observed 24-48h prior to foaling.

## THE FOALING PROCESS

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The mare will become restless, may roll frequently and may stop eating. Once foaling begins it is a fairly rapid process, taking maybe forty minutes from the first signs of the bag of amniotic fluid protruding from the vulva to the point where the foal is free from the mare. Like the majority of animals, donkey foals are usually born at night. Normal presentation is a diving position with the head between the forelegs.

Stand back and quietly watch, apart from carefully ensuring, when the foal is born, that its nostrils are free from any membranes or mucus. Most mares deliver lying down but if the mare is standing then attempt to catch the foal and hold close to the vulva to prevent early cord rupture. The cord will naturally remain intact until there is some movement from either the mare or the foal by which time vital blood will normally have drained from the placenta. In the case of early cord rupture, clamp to avoid foal blood loss. Spray or dip the end of the umbilicus with an antiseptic preparation recommended by your vet. Tie up the protruding placenta onto the mare's tail to prevent it being trodden on. Once the whole placenta has been passed collect it into a clean bucket for inspection. Any retained placenta must be identified as this is a source of post-partum infection.

### Emergency situations:

**If there are any doubts as to the normality of the presentation a veterinary surgeon should be called immediately. Whilst awaiting assistance walk the mare around her box to prevent her straining.**

**If a 'red bag' is seen first this means that the placenta has detached and been delivered before the foal. The foal will be without any support from the placenta and without oxygen. The foal will die if not immediately assisted by breaking open the bag and pulling the foal out.**

## POST FOALING

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The mare will dry and clean the foal by licking, this also helps the bonding process. If the mare is not licking the foal then rub the foal over with a towel as well as bringing the foal closer to the mare's nose to encourage interest. After a short rest the foal will try to stand, making many failed attempts. The mare should pass the placenta within the next hour - if no progress is made within 2 hours call your vet. Check that the foal's eyes are open and bright, and that the gums have changed from an initial dark pink to a bright pink colour. The foal's breathing should be steady and at a rate of up to 60 breaths per minute.

Foals are programmed by nature to search for an udder in shadow, confusingly there is shadow between the front legs as well as the hind ones. Experienced mares will help their foals by circling and nudging in the right direction, whereas maiden mares, perhaps confused and upset, may not offer the same degree of help and even reject or attack the foal. In this case urgent intervention and veterinary assistance will be required. Foals should consume 1-2 litres of colostrum within the first 12 hours of life. The first feed should be within 2-4 hours of birth otherwise they will run out of reserves and start to deteriorate quickly.

## THE FIRST FEW DAYS

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It is very important that the foal receives the mare's first milk (or colostrum) as this contains essential antibodies. An anti-tetanus injection can be given and a foal "check" carried out by your veterinary surgeon the following day.

Within twenty-four hours the foal will have the capacity to move quickly and confidently. Both mare and foal will benefit from enjoying a little sunshine and the opportunity to exercise in a safe and secure paddock on their own. Other donkeys can be aggressive to newborn foals, even those with the best of temperaments or close companions/other family members. It is essential that the foal does not get wet or cold, seek veterinary advice should they appear listless or "out of sorts".

## THE FIRST FEW WEEKS

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Milk is the foal's sole nutritional requirement for the first few weeks, but they soon pluck at strands of hay and grass, or will nibble at their mothers feed. The stable must be kept clean and free from soiled bedding. Ventilation must be good but draught-free, and water should be offered from a bucket secured in a holder to avoid accidents.

Foals develop rapidly, and lessons learned at this stage are invaluable. A soft foal slip (head collar) can be fitted and used to guide the foal out to the field with its mother. Even at this stage the simple command of "walk on" at the appropriate moment will reap dividends later. Gentle stroking of the lower legs and lifting of the feet are simple aids towards future good behaviour with the farrier. Consult with your vet for advice on worming and vaccinations. Foals often scour at 7-14 days, if this doesn't resolve quickly consult your vet.

## GROWING UP

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There are different opinions on how to wean – 'natural', 'gradual' or 'clean break'. They all have their own merits and pitfalls. Be guided by your vet, or an experienced advisor. Different circumstances will dictate a different approach, there is no 'one size fits all'. Male foals should be castrated between 10-18 months old, earlier castration may be appropriate if the foal attempts to mount the mare. Castration should be carried out at a time of year that avoids major fly worry.

Take this opportunity to give your foal/youngster the best start and the best learning opportunities in life. Introduce novel objects, and ask for new behaviours with patience and kindness. Allow the foal to learn about his or her world and what may be expected of them later in life by introducing them to things such as traffic, a horse-box, the farrier and dentist. Teach good manners from day one and try to avoid falling into the trap of allowing a 'cute' foal to get away with behaviour that will later on be undesirable at best, or at worst dangerous!

## CHECK LIST

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- Vets telephone number
- Feeding bottle with lamb teat (sterilised)
- Phone number for emergency supply of mares milk replacer
- Antiseptic such as iodine or hibiscrub
- Clean towels
- Clean bucket

Hopefully you will only need to phone your vet to come and see a healthy foal and a happy mum!  
**If you have any doubts or worries before, during or after foaling please call your vet.**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Edited by: Veterinary and Research Depts

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Published 2008. Revised January 2015.

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The Donkey Sanctuary was founded by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE in 1969.

The Donkey Sanctuary (registered charity number 264818) and its sole corporate trustee, The Donkey Sanctuary Trustee Limited (Company number 07328588) both have their registered office at Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, EX10 0NU.

Incorporating: The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys (EST); The International Donkey Protection Trust (IDPT).

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