



New Foal Exams

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One of the most important things a proud owner of a new foal can do is have their veterinarian examine the new arrival between 12 and 24 hours after it is born. Of course, the mare and foal should be examined sooner if the owner has any concerns about their well-being. Things that should raise immediate concern include the following: the foal has not stood within 2 hours of birth, nursed within 4 hours or the mare has not passed the placenta within 6 hours. Additionally, any signs of distress in either the mare or the foal should be examined immediately.

Thankfully, most of the time none of the previously mentioned ailments are present. However, there may still be an invisible problem, one that would not reveal itself for several days, one that can be readily diagnosed and subsequently addressed via a simple stall-side blood test. The often unseen problem is Failure of Passive Transfer.

Foals are born with a naive immune system; it does not recognize, and is therefore not able to respond to disease causing agents (viral or bacterial). Antibodies in the first milk of the mare (the colostrum) are absorbed into the foal's blood stream which transfers the protection of mare's immune system to the foal. A foal has usually absorbed a sufficient quantity of colostrum antibodies by the time it is 12 hours old, but can continue to absorb for up to 24 hours.

Veterinarians can measure the extent to which a foal has absorbed colostrum antibodies through a blood test that measures Immunoglobulin G (IgG). A foal is born with an IgG level of zero. There are defined IgG levels that are believed to be indicative of protective transfer of immunity. Test kits have been developed that measure the foal's IgG, stall side, in about 5 minutes.

Foals with inadequate transfer of passive immunity will eventually get sick. Many will succumb, as would any other immune compromised individual, when confronted with a serious bacterial or viral agent. Diagnosis of FTP between 12 and 24 hours of age gives veterinarians an opportunity to correct the deficiency through intravenous infusions of hyper-immunized equine plasma before the foal's immune system is tested.

The investment of time, energy, emotion and financial resources is considerable when it comes to planning for a new foal. Attention to the foal's immune system during a routine new foal check-up can help reduce unwanted setbacks in the foal's development and additional expense in treating a very fragile animal.