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Tips for Weaning

Weaning can be a stressful time for foals. This article will give some tips on minimizing stress and helping foals and mares make the transition smoothly and in good health.

Timing

Foals are typically weaned between 3 and 6 months. As a general rule, foals should be eating and drinking feed and water well alongside the mare and playing independently before they are ready to be weaned. The mare's body condition may also be an important factor in deciding when to wean. If the mare is losing weight, it is a good idea to wean sooner rather than later.



Handling

It is important that foals are used to being handled by people before weaning time, including leading alongside the mare, grooming, and picking up feet. If your foal is not already accustomed to these things, consider taking 15 minutes a day for a week or so to work with your foal before weaning. This will be time well worth spent if you have the unfortunate luck of needing to treat your weanling for an injury or illness.



Method

Foals can either be weaned abruptly or gradually. The method you choose will likely depend on the facilities and time you have available. Abrupt weaning works best if mare and foal are out of earshot from each other to minimize them from attempting to go through fences if they hear or see each other, as well as decreasing stress. Gradual weaning involves separating the mare and foal across a fence for a short time each day, typically during feeding time, and then gradually increasing their time apart before separating them completely. It is best for foals to be accustomed to their new pasture mates for at least a week prior to weaning. If you have only one foal, consider using a gentle mare or gelding to buddy up with during weaning time. Whichever method you choose, be sure to check fences for any gaps and make necessary repairs.

Exercise

Free exercise is important for proper musculoskeletal development. Regular or full-time turnout is recommended for foals to maintain muscle mass and growth, as well as provide mental stimulation and socialization with herd mates.



Vaccinations

Foals should receive their first set of vaccinations between 3-5 months old, a second set 30 days after the first, and a third set 6 months later. Talk with your veterinarian to develop a specific vaccination plan for your foals. It is ideal to time vaccinations at least a couple weeks before or after weaning, so you are not adding to the stress of the transition. The foal's immune system can be suppressed during the stress of weaning, so it is important to take this into consideration when timing vaccinations.

Deworming

Foals should be dewormed with fenbendazole (Panacur) or oxbendazole (Anthelcide) every 60 days until they are yearlings, and then a fecal exam should be performed to develop a deworming protocol according to the individual horse's parasite load.

Hoof Care

Hopefully, you have already addressed any conformational problems such as flexural or angular limb deformities, club feet or low heels, but if not, now is a good time to assess and make a plan. Foot care in the first year of life should not be overlooked. Regular feet trimming, which typically involves just a rasp rather than nippers, is important to help proper development of hoof structures and bone alignment to decrease the chance of lameness. It is a good idea to make sure the foal is well adjusted for a few weeks after weaning before adding the stress of a farrier visit.



Mare Care

A mare's energy demands will drop considerably when she stops lactating, so her diet needs to be adjusted accordingly. If the mare is in good body condition, her grain ration should be stopped at the time of weaning to help her stop producing milk. The udder should be monitored for symptoms of mastitis, which include heat, pain, swelling, or thick, yellowish discharge.

The stress of weaning is inevitable for every foal, but can be minimized under the right circumstances and environment to help them transition smoothly from a nursing foal to an independent, confident yearling.

