



TAYLOR EQUINE HOSPITAL

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Weaning Foals

Weaning is a very important time in a growing foal's life. It can be a smooth process if measures are taken to minimize stress levels.

When to wean:

Typically, horses are weaned at 4-6 months of age. The mare's milk naturally starts to decrease in production when the foal is about 3 months of age. By 4 months of age most the foal's nutrition should be coming from solid food (hay and grain). In most cases straight alfalfa hay can be too rich for the foal and cause musculoskeletal problems (lameness or leg deformities). Instead foals should be fed good quality grass hay or mixed grass-alfalfa hay. Specialized growth grain formulas (Equine Jr, Safechoice Mare & Foal, etc) are recommended over whole grains (oats or corn) because whole grains are low in calcium and copper. Grain should be feed at 1-1.5% of the foal's body weight.

How do I know when my foal is ready?

- 1) Foals should be socialized with other horses. They should be able to handle themselves without the aid of the mare's protection.
- 2) They should be nutritionally independent. The majority of their nutrition should no longer rely on the mother's milk.
- 3) They should be emotionally independent. The foal spends more their day not directly by their mother's side.

Methods of weaning:

The gradual method is preferred over abrupt weaning. No matter what type of weaning method is used the mare should always be taken from the foal and not the reverse. The foal should be comfortable with the surroundings and know where the feed and water buckets are located. A popular method of weaning if you have several mares and foals is slowly removing one-two mares at a time



over a several week period. The foals still have an adult horse to protect them and often buddy up with other foals without issue. The mares can also benefit from being taken away in pairs so they have a buddy in their new pasture or pen. Nanny horses or ponies are another method of weaning where the foal still

has a buddy once the mother is removed. Nanny horses can be a barren mare or older gelding that is part of the same herd before and after weaning. A gentle older horse out in pasture with one foal or multiple young horses can aide in calming a young horse. A younger horse can work themselves up running around a pasture but can run up to the older horse to calm down. Fence line weaning is another option but care must be taken that the fence separating the mare and foal is tall and solid. The foal should not be able to jump the fence or nurse through the panels. Approximately a week after the mare and foal have been in separate pastures, the mare can be permanently separated. A gentle horse can be placed in the pasture/pen where the mother was to act as a new buddy for the foal. Gradual stall weaning is similar to



fence weaning. A large double stall can be divided by a partition to allow the mare and foal to see each other but not be together. The mare and foal should be in the large stall several days before adding the divider. Separate access to feed and water should be available so the mare and foal get used to eating on their side before the divider is added. Depending on the stall used the mare can gradually be moved down the barn aisle and a gentle horse placed next to the foal. If foals are able to buddy up with another foal or gentle horse they are less likely to show stressed frantic behavior. Frantic behavior is often seen when a foal is weaned abruptly from

its mother in a locked in stall by itself. It is never a good idea to lock two foals in a small stall because there is not enough space for the less dominant foal to get away from the more dominant foal.

Proper Planning:

The stall, pen or pasture where the foal will be weaned should be checked for sharp edges, protruding nails or anything that may cause the foal to be injured once separated. Fencing should be high enough and strong enough not to encourage the foal to attempt to jump or go through it. The weather is an important factor in weaning. The fall is traditionally the time of year foals are weaned because daytime temperatures are less than 85 F to reduce the chance of heat stress. The foal should not be weaned when they are already sick or recovering from another injury. Therefore, **immediately pre- or post weaning is not the proper time for the foal to be vaccinated, dewormed or have their hooves trimmed.** Vaccinations should be done either a few weeks before weaning or a few weeks after weaning.

Why is decreasing stress at weaning important?

Foals that are stressed loose more weight at weaning, have higher heart rates, increased cortisol secretions (stress hormones) and are more prone to gastric ulcers. Stress can also lead to increase incidence of injury or illness. Illnesses that have been associated with immunocompromised foals at weaning are respiratory and gastrointestinal infections.