

Minimizing Weaning Stress

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As autumn is approaching producers need to have a plan in place for weaning foals. This is a stressful time for both the mare and foal because of the emotional and nutritional bond between the two. Some producers have employed methods based on tradition or convenience which may compromise the health and well-being of the mare and foal. Mares in the wild will generally not wean their foals until the next foal is born the following year. This method of allowing the mare to wean a foal in her own time is not advised for successful horse production. The increased nutrient demand on mares during late gestation and still nursing a foal is difficult to meet. Meeting the nutritional requirements for both stages of production is not only challenging, but will increase feed costs. By reducing the stress of the dam and foal producers can decrease the chance of injury and disease. Stressed foals are more likely to get sick and cause injury to themselves or other foals. One practice of weaning foals that has been used by horse producers for many years, primarily as a form of convenience, is to remove the foals from the mares and keep them in a box stall. Often times this is when foals are given their first round of vaccinations and initial halter breaking. This may be one of the least labor intensive methods and is also one of the most stressful. Research over many years has shown that there are better methods of weaning to reduce stress and improve production.

During the first three months of the foal's life the mare can provide all of the nutrients needed by the foal. After this the foal will need to be supplemented with pasture or hay and in many cases a concentrate feed. Implementing a creep feeding program will ensure the foals will not have to compete with mares for feed. Creep feeders can be easily constructed with portable livestock panels to create a small pen and should have two openings for foals to enter and exit. The dimensions of the opening to prevent standard sized mares from entering are approximately 46 inches high by 16 inches wide. The perimeter should be eight feet by eight feet for one foal and increased by two feet on all sides for each additional foal. There should be enough bunk space so that all foals are able eat at once. Commercial foal feeders with metal bars spaced so that mares cannot eat from them can be purchased. When using a creep feeder do not overfeed or allow feed to remain in the feeder for an extended period to prevent spoilage. Monitor the body condition of your foals and adjust the amount of feed accordingly. Many commercial feed companies offer foal rations to meet the nutrient requirements of growing foals. Research from Virginia Tech has shown that supplementing foals with a concentrate ration compared to pasture and hay alone decreased the stress response during weaning.

Handling and halter breaking foals prior to weaning is a good idea to minimize the stress of handling during the weaning process. When mares are being bred and checked for pregnancy is a good opportunity to handle foals. Teaching foals to lead can be easier when using the mare as a guide, as it will naturally want to follow the mare. Foals are curious and spending time in the pasture with them early in life and gradually getting them to accept human contact will aid in halter breaking later. Vaccination of foals with both primary and booster doses should be completed well in advance of weaning to ensure that the foals have developed sufficient immunity. A good deworming program is also essential for optimal health of foals.

The most common age to wean foals is between four and six months of age. At this time the foal is receiving most of its nutrients from pasture, hay and concentrate. One method of weaning to decrease stress is gradual separation. This method will require two adjoining pastures or paddocks with horse safe fencing where the mares and foals are in sight of each other. Over a period of days the time of separation will be increased until they are completely separated. Generally, foals are allowed to nurse three times on the first day, twice on the second day and once on the third day. This is one of the most labor intensive methods of weaning, but research has shown that it is one of the least stressful methods. One way to minimize labor is to build your creep feeder between two pastures and once the foals are in the creep feeder prevent access of the foals to the mare pasture.

A similar method to gradual weaning to reduce stress is to remove one or two mares from the herd at a time. Producers should begin with the first foaled or the most dominant mares in the herd and then every few days remove one or two more until all of the mares are removed. When moving mares the transition will be smoother if they are out of range of sight and sound. This method is less labor intensive than gradual weaning, but it extends the weaning process. The concept behind this method is based on the fact that horses are herd animals and prefer to remain in the herd. Horses prefer familiar surroundings and not removing foals from a pasture that they are familiar with will reduce the stress of the foals. It is helpful to leave a gentle dry mare with the weanlings and she should be part of the herd at least one month before weaning. Do not wean foals that are suffering from an illness as this will only exacerbate the situation. If your only option of weaning is weaning foals in a stall, it is preferred that the foals are kept in separate stalls within sight of other foals. Traditionally, many producers would place two foals in a stall together, but research has shown that this is more stressful due to foals fighting one another.

To learn more horse production techniques be sure and attend the Mississippi Master Stockman program at Mississippi State University on September 14 and 15. This program offers basic and advanced horse tracks with topics on production, nutrition, reproduction, health and management. As a special event Curt Pate, AQHA Professional Horseman, will be demonstrating cattle handling techniques on horseback and there is an opportunity for participants to bring their own horse and ride with Curt. For more information on the program visit your county extension office or contact Preston Buff (pbuff@ads.msstate.edu; 662-325-2852).