



Rearing Healthy Foals, Kittens and Pups

Watching young animals grow and develop, learn, play and interact is one of life's greatest pleasures. Ensuring the health of an animal during these formative stages will help to set a solid foundation which will serve them in maintaining long term health and wellbeing as adults.

It all begins with the animal's parents whose genetic material is mixed to produce their offspring. Parents who are healthy (good genetics, are managed well and receive optimal nutrition) are likely to have a smooth birth process and produce healthy young with no congenital abnormalities and properly functioning immune systems.

Dystocia (difficult birth) can weaken young animals and deprive them of valuable oxygen which can cause damage to the brain and other organs. Cats and horses generally deliver their young with few complications while dogs more commonly encounter difficulty. It is important to closely monitor and observe the process helping to provide a calm and quiet environment for birth and be ready to act at the first sign of a problem.

Signs of dystocia may include extended periods of straining unproductively and abnormal discharge (green, black or has large amounts of blood) from the mother's birth canal.

The newly born animal (neonate) is surrounded in a foetal membrane and makes its way through the birth canal with its front legs presented first followed by its head and back end. If it is presented otherwise, it is likely to require assistance as soon as possible.

Once the young animal is delivered, its mother will usually lick it. This is an important part of their bonding process and also helps to clear the neonate's airway and stimulate it to breathe. Breathing must resume within the first minute delivery. If not, clear their airway and briskly rub pups and kittens and massage foals with a towel. Should this fail, mouth to nostril inflation of the lungs is helpful but take care not to over inflate the lungs. The umbilical cord is an open passage for bacteria to enter the bloodstream so it is good practice to disinfect the stump with an antiseptic solution, especially in foals.

Pups and kittens are born with their eyes closed and crawl around feeling their way while foals have open eyes and are usually standing up within an hour after birth. A healthy neonate is active after birth and seeks the udder or teat of their mother.

The next important ingredient for the development of a healthy immune system is colostrum, the first milk of the mother, which is worth its weight in gold. Colostrum is packed full of antibodies to protect the neonate from infection and is energy rich giving vitality. It is of utmost importance that the neonate receives a good feed of colostrum between 1 hour and 12 hours after birth.

Besides for infection due to poor immunity from lack of colostrum, the biggest easily preventable killers of young animals are hypothermia (low body heat) and hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar levels). These leave young animals severely debilitated promptly leading to a vicious cycle of dehydration, further weakness and death.

Fortunately this cycle is usually easy to reverse with good nursing care and providing there are no other abnormalities young animals bounce back beautifully which is always a very rewarding and gratifying experience.