



During a normal delivery, the foal's feet are presented at the vulva within three minutes of the water breaking followed by the head. This stage normally lasts for 10-45 minutes. Photos by Linda Zupanc.



# Foaling Emergencies

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Having a foal on the way is very exciting and, although most foalings go ahead without a hitch, it is vital to be able to recognise a problem early. It is important to understand the normal foaling process, recognise problems and know when to contact your veterinarian for assistance. This could mean the difference between saving the mare and foal, or losing one or both.

The signs of imminent foaling are variable and subtle. Some mares have udder development and 'waxing up' within the 48 hours prior to foaling, some mares run milk and some mares don't give you any obvious hints that they are about to foal.

Normal delivery of the foal is a continuous process that is described in three stages:

Stage 1: This stage is not well defined and some mares may not show obvious signs. Some mares may display signs of increased restlessness, getting up and down, stretching, flank watching, tail swishing, kicking at the abdomen, sweating in the flank region and small frequent urination. If noticed, this stage usually lasts for 15-90 minutes.

Stage 2: This stage starts with the breaking of the chorioallantoic membrane and the passage of fluid from the vulva ('water breaking'). During a normal delivery, the foal's feet are presented at the vulva within three minutes of the water breaking followed by the head at five minutes. They may be covered by the thin bluish/white amnionic membrane, which can be removed from over the foal's nose/mouth. Some mares may get up and change position during this stage. Stage 2 ends with the foal being born. This stage normally lasts for 10-45 minutes with constant progression of the foal out of the vulva. The mare often lies quietly for 10-15 minutes following foaling.

There are a variety of foaling problems that can occur and the clinical signs for each can differ greatly depending on what is wrong.

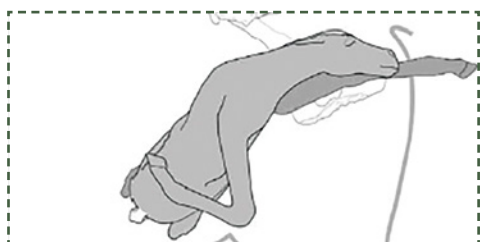
Stage 3: This stage involves the passage of the placental membranes after foaling. The placenta is normally passed within 30 mins to 3 hours after foaling. The mare may display some mild signs of discomfort during this time.

There are a variety of foaling problems that can occur and the clinical signs for each can differ greatly depending on what is wrong. Some problems are obvious, i.e. the foal not emerging, the placenta being delivered before the foal or placental retention. Other problems have more subtle or absent clinical signs immediately after foaling.





Photo by Linda Zupanc.



### Dystocia

Dystocia is the most commonly encountered foaling problem. This is where the foal is having trouble coming out. This may be due to an abnormal position (e.g. leg or head flexed back or in breech position), abnormalities of the foal (such as severe flexural deformities) or a very large foal. If the mare's water has broken and you do not see two legs and a head within five minutes (e.g. if you see nothing or only one leg) or the foal stops advancing during the delivery, you must contact your veterinarian immediately. If your mare is having birthing problems you only have a narrow window in which to seek veterinary help for a favourable outcome. However, some dystocias cannot be corrected in the field, and may require referral to an equine hospital for further assistance and potential caesarean. These often have a more serious prognosis. The outcomes of the mare and foal are often tied to the length of time of dystocia prior to resolution, i.e. the quicker you get help, the more favourable the outcome may be.

**TOP LEFT:** Three examples of dystocia (problem foalings). Photo source Equine Reproduction, Second Edition by Angus McKinnon *et al.*

**LEFT:** Red bag delivery where the placenta is delivered before the foal. Quick action is required because the foal will not be receiving oxygen until it is out and breathing. Photo sourced from: [www.vetnext.com](http://www.vetnext.com).



Once the placenta has separated (red bag delivery), the foal is not receiving any oxygen until it is out and breathing.

### Red bag delivery

Premature placental separation or 'red bag delivery' is where the placenta has detached from the uterus and is being delivered before the foal. The foal normally gets its oxygen from the connection between the placenta and the uterus. Once the placenta has separated, the foal is not receiving any oxygen until it is out and breathing. If this occurs, you would see a red velvet-like chorioallantoic membrane at the vulva. If allowed to continue, this will result in a severely compromised foal and likely death. Quick action is required to avoid a severely compromised foal. In this case, there is no time to wait for your veterinarian to arrive. The bag should be cut with scissors (being careful not to cut the foal) and help the foal be delivered. Contact your veterinarian immediately for any assistance and to check the foal as these foals can become severely compromised and may require intensive care.

### Retained placenta

A retained placenta is when the placenta has not been expelled within 6 hours of foaling. If this is the case, do not try and pull on the membranes. You should contact your veterinarian immediately for assistance. Retained placenta in the mare can have very serious and devastating consequences if not treated.

Other problems that may occur during delivery of the foal are rupture of the uterus, rupture of the uterine artery or gastrointestinal problems, such as a ruptured intestine or recto-vaginal tearing during a violent foaling. If not already attended by a veterinarian, the mare should be closely examined following any difficult foaling or if the mare appears unwell, is in pain or you have any other concerns.

Retained placenta in the mare can have very serious and devastating consequences if not treated.

### Summary


Call your veterinarian when:

- The foal doesn't present the normal birthing appearance (two feet and a head) within five minutes of the water breaking.
- One or both legs appear, but the head doesn't present within five minutes of the water breaking.
- The placenta is retained for over 6 hours.
- After delivery, the mare exhibits signs of colic, depression or inappetence.
- If the foal is not up, standing and nursing within two hours after birth.

Act first, then call your veterinarian when:

- You have a 'red bag delivery'. Cut the placenta (be careful of the foal) and help with the delivery of the foal.


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** About the Author: Linda Dillenbeck, BVSc, is a veterinarian at WestVETS in Anstead. She graduated from the University of Sydney in 2012 and then completed a 12 month internship at Agnes Banks Equine Clinic in New South Wales. This was followed by a year in private equine practice in New South Wales before making the move to Queensland. Linda is interested in all aspects of veterinary medicine with a focus on equine practice. She has particular interests in diagnostic imaging and equine lameness.




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