

Ask the Vet August 2013

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Ask the Vet with Dr. Steve Fisch, DVM

Common Methods and Effects of Weaning



METHODS OF WEANING

The best weaning method is the one that fits your facility and results in a stress-free, relaxed, and uninjured mare and foal.

One popular method is pasture weaning and this method is commonly used on farms where mares and foals are pastured in groups. At weaning time, one or two of the mares with the oldest foals are removed from the group, leaving their foals with the group. The mares should be removed quickly at a time when the foals are occupied somewhere else. The mares should be taken to an area completely out of sight and hearing distance of the other mares and foals. Additional mares may be removed from the group when their foals reach the desired age. This process occurs until all mares have been removed. Some farms will introduce a nice calm gelding that remains with the weaned foals to provide some education. This method seems to have little stress on the foals as most will quickly adjust to the herd of familiar horses. However, all foals should be observed in the hours following weaning to ensure they don't become too distressed when they realize they can't find their mothers.

If pasture or interval weaning isn't possible, which is often the case if there is only one foal to be weaned, other common methods are used. One method involves immediate separation from the dam, while the other is gradual separation. Immediate separation involves bringing the mare and foal into a stall and removing the mare. Some people will place the newly weaned foal with a companion animal or



another just-weaned foal. Although a companion may seem to be a less stressful option than leaving the foal alone, foals that are weaned and given companions have been shown to have increased stress response than those weaned and left alone. If you do plan to use a companion

animal, it is important that the foal doesn't become overly attached. This can make separation from that companion nearly as stressful as weaning from its mother.

Gradual weaning is a common method. Allowing foals to see, hear, smell, and touch their dams through a fence, but not nurse, for seven days prior to complete separation is known to be less stressful in the days following weaning than abrupt weaning. Studies have shown a reduced stress response and higher feed intake in the first week after weaning in gradually weaned foals. Foals weaned by this method also exhibit less emotional stress, vocalization, and activity than abruptly weaned foals. When comparing gradual weaning with abrupt weaning, there is little difference in feed intake from about two weeks after weaning, but the major benefit of gradual weaning is the reduced stress and reduced risk of injury.

EFFECTS OF WEANING

Researchers describe an animal as in a state of stress if it must make abnormal or extreme change in its physiology or behavior to cope with the adverse effects of its environment or management. Under that definition, weaning surely qualifies as a stressor to young horses. It has been documented that foals which suffer undue stress when being weaned can lose their appetites and lose weight and when they recover later on, they often undergo a sudden growth spurt. The result of this dip and surge in the growth curve of a young horse sometimes is a cause of developmental orthopedic disease (DOD), the condition in which bones and joints begin to develop abnormally, causing contracted tendons, phytitis, or even bone cysts in the joints of the limbs. In contrast, foals which undergo the minimum amount of stress during weaning continue to grow at a more even rate. A level rate of growth makes them far less predisposed to DOD.

One study reported that stalled yearlings had a reduction in radiographic bone density that was not observed in age-matched controls maintained on pasture. Reduced bone density is one effect that is minimized in foals that are weaned on pasture as described previously.

Another study evaluated effect of age on weaning. Foals were weaned at either 4.5 months of age or 6.0 months of age. To compensate for



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possible seasonal effects, foals were matched so a 6-month old foal and a 4.5-month old foal were weaned on the same day and then kept in the same pasture. Although it was suspected that younger foals would be affected by weaning more than the older foals, weaning at an older age did not reduce the depression in average daily weight gain observed in the first week after weaning. Furthermore, at 8 months of age, there was no difference in either height at the withers or body weight between the two weaning groups.



SUMMARY

Every foal must be weaned from its dam at some point. However, how the weaning process is undertaken may have significant effects on the growing foal. The goal is to have the foal healthy, well socialized and growing at level rate when it is weaned. Then each management team must evaluate their facility and

situation to make the foal's cross over from a life with mama to a life with his friends as seamless as possible. The result will be a happier, healthier and sounder adult athlete.

Ask The Vet

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health and then publish the question along with the vet's response in a future issue of The Horse Resource.

Ask away.... Send questions to us at: thehorseresource@msn.com Subject line: "Ask the Vet"

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