

A NEW LIFE WITHOUT MOM

By Tom Hutchins, DVM, DABVP

One of the most traumatic times in a young horse's life is when he is separated from his mother at weaning time. From birth, he has been dependent on the mare for sustenance and protection. At weaning time that changes and the youngster must cope with the world, minus his mother's protective presence.

True, the youngster has become less and less dependent on the mare's milk for a food supply, turning to hay or grass and supplemental grain instead. As the foal matured and independence grew, the youngster romped off with other foals or by himself no longer glued to his mother's side.

However, when danger threatened or he was traumatized in any way, the foal normally fled back to the mare's side, often nursing on arrival. The nursing appears to be as much a security blanket as a need for nourishment. Now, all of that is about to change, because it is time for permanent separation.

The first question the horse owner must answer is the age at which the foal should be weaned. Three months? Four months? Five months? Six months?

The next question involves how to go about the weaning process. Should it be done cold turkey or should it be done gradually, over a period of time?

For some time it was common practice to wean foals when they reached six months of age. Many owners follow this practice and are highly successful in doing so. Many horsemen believed that at six months of age, the foal had gained a degree of independence and mental maturity that would better enable him to withstand the trauma of separation.

Today, a number of healthy foals are successfully weaned at three months of age, rather than six months. The key word here is "healthy". The physical condition of the foal at weaning is highly important. He should be robust, full of energy, and eating well on his own. He should have access to food that will provide his growing body with the necessary nutrition, but not so much that he grows too fast and develops problems such as physitis. This is why it is important to make your veterinarian a partner in the weaning process. The proper level of nutrition is critical in maintaining good health and proper development. Your veterinarian is your best ally.

There are a few steps a horse owner should take to ensure a successful weaning, no matter the age of the foal. As mentioned, the foal should be in good health, with outside stresses eliminated as much as possible. For example, this is not the time to be vaccinating the foal. Nor should one launch a training program with the foal the day after weaning or decide that is the day to have his feet trimmed.

The foal will still be focused on the absence of his mother and will need some time to adjust; how much time will vary on a foal-by-foal basis. Some foals make the adjustment in a day or two, while others



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Silverado Equine Performance, LLC was established in 2013.

With 15 years experience in the performance horse industry, Dr. Hutchins' goal was to create a practice that fulfilled a special niche: provide the absolute best care available for each horse with all necessary diagnostic tools available for your equine athlete and be able to bring it to you in the comfort of your farm or stable. The scope of the practice is primarily lameness and sports medicine although other services are available upon request. This allows Dr. Hutchins to stay on the leading edge of performance medicine. It takes a team to keep a finely tuned athlete going, so when necessary, recommendations and referrals to the most qualified professionals for a given condition are made.

Continue Weaning...

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still may be calling for their mothers a week after weaning. Much will depend on the foal's level of independence.

While the foal shouldn't be trained immediately in the wake of weaning, he should have been handled well in advance of weaning so that he knows about being led, being tied, and having his feet picked up.

Once all of this has been accomplished and you have decided that it is time to wean your healthy youngster, the decision must be made as to just how to separate the mare and foal.

Safety is of utmost importance. The foal should be placed in a pen or paddock that is deemed safe. Wire of any kind is an invitation to disaster as the foal may try to get through the fence to return to his mother. Instead, the foal should be placed in a safe box stall or paddock surrounded by boards, poles or plastic fencing that will reduce the potential for injury. Before weaning is undertaken, closely inspect the stall or paddock to make sure there are no protruding nails or objects lying around in which the foal might become entangled. The rule of thumb is this: If there is a danger spot, the foal will find it.

The "cold-turkey" method involves separating a foal and his mother abruptly and not letting them have any contact for several weeks or even months. This method often makes it possible to get

through the weaning process in a very short period of time. At the same time, this is the most traumatic approach. The foal often will be desperate to find his mother that first day or so and will be calling for her constantly. If the mare can hear the foal and answer it, the problem is worsened. If this method is used, the foal and mare should be completely out of sight and sound of each other.

The "gradual" method involves separating the mare and foal, but allowing them to have visual contact by housing them in adjacent stalls or pens. Some owners separate mare and foal for a period of time, then allow them to get back together again. As time goes on they extend the time spent apart and, at an opportune point, make the separation permanent. The gradual method often is less traumatic than the cold turkey approach, but it does take longer. Much, in this regard, depends on the mare and her attitude. Many mares, after having a foal at their side for four to six months, are happy to be rid of them. In many cases, mares will welcome the separation so that they can eat and rest in peace.

As is the case with so many matters when dealing with horses, weaning is something that should be approached on an individual basis. What is right for one foal may not be for another. The key elements to successful weaning are starting with a healthy foal, providing him with proper nutrition, and placing him in an environment where there is minimal danger of injury.

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