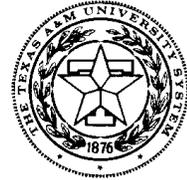


**TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF ANIMAL SCIENCE
EQUINE SCIENCES PROGRAM**



MINIMIZING WEANING STRESS IN FOALS

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In today's horse industry there are numerous competitive opportunities for very young horses. Many young horses are shown in weanling and yearling halter futurities. A high percentage of young horses are ridden as long yearlings in preparation for 2-year-old performance classes. In some cases, race horses are competitively raced prior to their 2-year-old birthday. Winning or placing in these activities can lead to horses earning sizeable purses and/or owners receiving high sale prices for these horses. If horseowners are going to be competitive, in the show arena and on the race track, their young horses must be as mature, healthy, and as sound as genetically possible, when going into conditioning and training programs. To achieve this objective, many management practices are important in the life of the young horse. One very critical time, in this developmental process, is the weaning period.

Traditionally at weaning time, which is usually 5-6 months of age, foals are weaned in an abrupt manner which means they are completely separated out of sight and sound of their dams. Foals are often taken to strange surroundings, dewormed, vaccinated, castrated, halter broken and may be offered feed for the first time. In response, foals frantically neigh, fret, run, get hot, don't eat (or overeat), etc. These stress responses are often accompanied by losses in weight, injuries, lowered resistance to diseases, etc. Foals weaned in an abrupt manner often take 3-4 weeks to recover from the weaning process. Why do foals react in this manner? Foals receive nourishment from milk and receive security by touching, hearing, seeing and smelling their mothers. In an abrupt weaning scenario, the milk and security the foal

receives from its mother is removed all at once. Psychologists say that changes in the environment can cause stress, but....that if the environment can be changed slowly enough, the stress on the animal can be minimized. Below are some practical suggestions on how to minimize stress during weaning time.

Health Programs - Start foals on a foal health program well in advance of weaning. Foals should first be dewormed at 4-6 weeks of age and should receive their initial immunizations at 2-3 months of age. Handle foals as quietly as possible. These practices will lead to healthier foals that are accustomed to being handled at weaning time.

Creep Feeding - Provide foals creep feed at 2-3 months of age. Feed a clean, fresh, completely balanced 16-18 % CP concentrate to meet the foal's nutrient requirements. Provide some high quality pasture and/or hay for foals. In other words, have foals safely "on feed" well ahead of weaning time.

Mare Feeding - Limit or omit the lactating mare's concentrate 7-10 days preweaning. Providing mares no, or limited concentrate, with high quality pasture or grass hay, but will slow down their milk production as they are being fed to meet maintenance requirements only. Mares producing less milk may be more comfortable through weaning. In addition, foals will receive less milk through this period, which will decrease their dependence on their mothers.

Weaning Facilities - Evaluate the physical facilities (stalls, paddocks, pens,

pastures) to identify the best arrangement for weaning. Weaning facilities should be safe, where foals can't jump fences or squeeze through small spaces, etc. Foals should be able to see, smell and hear their dams.... just not nurse. Weaning areas should be clean, well ventilated, and as dust free as possible, to keep foals from developing respiratory problems. Provide shade for foals and clean fresh water. Provide the same creep feed, as was fed preweaning, in safe feeders. Do not change feeds at the weaning time! Feed high quality hay.

Separation Plans - Physically separate foals from their dams where foals can't nurse, at weaning time. One method is to place a foal, or a pair of foals, in a stall and place their dam(s) on each side in adjacent stalls. Leave the mares 3-4 days, then remove them. Another method, popular for weaning large groups of foals, is to place several foals in a small pen or paddock and allow dams access to the pen or paddock. Mares should be able to see, smell, and hear their foals and visa versa. On day one, remove one mare, preferably the mare with the most independent foal. Progressively remove one mare each day, till all mares are removed and the weaning of all pairs is complete.

Weaning can be one of the most stressful times in a young horses' life...but it doesn't have to be if proper management is practiced. Preparation for weaning and utilizing gradual weaning techniques cause reduced stress which helps minimize injuries and disease, and maximizes growth rates which are so necessary for success in today's highly competitive horse industry.

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