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# Feeding the orphaned foal

by Izak Hofmeyr

**There are various reasons why it may be necessary to feed a foal. It could be orphaned, or its mother may, for some reason, not have enough milk to sustain it. It may even have been rejected. Make contingency plans before the mare's due date to make sure that you can handle a crisis situation.**

Colostrum is the first milk produced by the mare. It contains the essential antibodies necessary for the foal to develop a healthy immune system. The foal needs to absorb this during the first day of life. If not and he is less than 24 hours old, he should be given colostrum from another mare. If he is older than 24 hours, he can only receive the appropriate protection through a plasma transfusion performed by a veterinarian.

Once the foal's immunologic status has been ensured, one must look at the options for providing it with the proper nutrients and calories. Feeding options for the orphaned foal include providing a nurse mare, feeding with a bottle or feeding by bucket.

## Rules of feeding

According to Dr Enette van Dyk, senior lecturer in Companion Animal Clinical Studies at the Faculty

of Veterinary Science at Onderstepoort, the first rule of feeding is hygiene. It is essential to have clean buckets, utensils and a clean stable.

Van Dyk points out that the suckling reflex is lost early in the foal's life and must be established within the first few days. Once it has learned to suckle, it can be trained to drink from a bucket. Bucket-feeding is less labour intensive than bottle-feeding. It also minimises bonding to humans.

The second rule of feeding is to offer the milk every day at the same temperature. It is more convenient to offer it cold, which is fine – just offer it at more or less the same temperature every day.

## Feeding schedule

At first the foal should receive feeding every two hours. After a week or so, this can be changed to four-hourly feedings. After a month, four times a day should suffice. Feeding large amounts at once increase the risk of diarrhoea or colic. Keep the bucket clean – discard leftover milk.

Mare's milk is obviously the best nutritional option for a foal. Unfortunately it is not readily available for the orphan foal except in the nurse mare option. Van Dyk provided a practical recipe based on cow's milk, to overcome this problem:

**First ten days:** Dilute full-cream cow's milk 50:50 with lime water (ask for lime at your chemist). Add 35 g of glucose/litre (not sugar – ask for glucose at your chemist). After ten days you can start feeding undiluted cow's milk.

Denkavit milk replacer can also be fed instead of this recipe. Mix as normal and feed 6 to 10 litres per day. Be sure to offer a creep-feed right from the beginning.

Important note: Use glucose and not sucrose for extra energy. Foals cannot digest sucrose – it ferments and causes gas, colic and diarrhoea.

Generally the normal nursing foal will eat 25 to 30% of its body weight per day. The total amount is divided by the number of feedings to determine the amount of milk that should be offered at each feeding.

Hay and grain should be available for the foal from an early age. A crucial factor, points out Van Dyk, is that the protein requirement of a young foal is very high. A yearling ration containing at least 16% protein, mixed in equal amounts with good quality chopped lucerne hay, should be adequate. Once the foal eats 1 kg of this mix per day, he can be weaned over a period of 4-5 days. Bring down the amount of milk gradually, but once you have weaned the foal, under no circumstances give it milk again. This can upset the foal's digestive system.

Monitor your foal's weight and growth on a weekly basis. Foals should have a flat back. Although the ribs may be showing, it should be the picture of health. If the foal's backbone or pelvis is visible, the foal is too thin. Check with your vet to determine if there is a medical or nutritional problem. A big concern that orphaned foal owners have is stunting the animal's growth. As long as the foal is healthy, eating and growing, it should reach its adult size. Fear of stunting the foal's growth often leads to overfeeding, which can create developmental and health problems. **SAH**



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