



Ballybrown Equine Clinic



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FOAL GROWTH

A healthy foal will grow rapidly, gaining in weight, height and strength almost before your eyes. From birth to age two, a young horse can achieve 90 % or more of its full adult size, sometimes putting on as much as 3 pounds per day.

Genetics and environment play significant roles in determining individual growth patterns. Through research, we also know we can influence a foal's growth and development- for better or worse- by the nutrition we supply.

STRIVE FOR BALANCE

Feeding young horses is a careful balancing act. The interplay between genetics, management, and nutrition is complex. While the genetics of each individual horse are out of our control, through proper management, we can affect its ultimate outcome.

The nutritional start a foal gets can have a profound affect on its health and soundness for the rest of its life. We can accelerate growth if we choose. However, research suggests that a balanced dietary approach, which supports no more than the moderate growth rate, is less likely to cause developmental problems.

Some conditions, which have been associated with rapid growth rates include:

- Contracted tendons.
- Epiphysitis.
- Angular limb deformities.
- Osteochondrosis.

THE NURSING FOAL

One of the foal's first missions in life is to stand and nurse. In doing so, it receives the antibody-rich colostrum which helps protect it from disease. During the first weeks of life, the mare's milk provides everything a rapidly growing foal needs for sustenance. The burden then gradually shifts to other sources.

During lactation, a mare will produce an average 2-3% of her body weight in milk a day. But in order to do so she must receive enough feed and water.

Observe the foals nursing habits. If it suckles for more than thirty minutes at a time, it may not be receiving enough milk. Supplemental feed or milk replacement may be required.

Peak lactation generally occurs during the second and third month of a foal's life. At this time a mare will need almost double the amount of feed she required during her early pregnancy. In addition the extra energy, her diet must include adequate protein, vitamins and minerals to keep from depleting her own body reserves. Increases and decreases in feed should be made gradually over a 7-10 day period.

THE FOAL'S CHANGING DIET.

As early as 10-14 days of age, a foal may begin to show an interest in feed. By nibbling and sampling, the youngster learns to eat solid food. Its digestive system quickly adapts to the dietary changes. At 8-10 weeks of age, mare's milk alone may not adequately meet the foal's nutritional needs depending on the desired growth rate an owner wants for a foal. In order to achieve a more rapid rate of gain, high-quality grains and forage should be added to the foal's diet.

It is essential the ration be properly balanced for vitamins and minerals. Deficits, excesses or imbalances of calcium, selenium, and vitamin E are of particular concern in the growing foal. Improper amounts or ratios can lead to skeletal problems.

FOAL FEEDING GUIDELINES

As the foal's dietary requirements shift from milk to feed and forage, your role in providing the proper nutrition gains in importance. Here are some guidelines to help you meet the young horse's needs:

- Provide high quality roughage (hay and pasture) free choice.
- Supplement with a high quality, properly balanced grain concentrate at weaning, or earlier if more rapid rates of gain are desired.
- Start by feeding 1% of the foal's body weight per day (i.e. 1kg/2.2lbs of feed for each 100 kgs of body weight).
- Weigh and adjust the feed ration based on growth and fitness. A weight tape can help approximate the foal's size.
- Foals have small stomachs so divide the daily ration into 2-3 feedings.
- Make sure feeds contain the proper balance of vitamins, minerals, energy and protein.
- Use a creep feeder or feed the foal separate from the mare so it can eat its own ration.
- Remove uneaten portions between feedings.
- Do not over feed. Over weight foals are more prone to developmental orthopedic disease.
- Provide unlimited fresh water.
- Provide opportunity for exercise.

WEANING

Foals are commonly weaned at 4-6 months of age. Beginning at about the fourth month, the mares milk supply declines and a natural weaning process begins. Once the foal is weaned it should be eating 2-3% of its body weight in feed and forage per day

The mare's feed should be reduced once the foal is weaned to eliminate further milk production.

SUSTAINING GROWTH.

Weanlings and yearlings continue to build bone and muscle mass at a remarkable rate. From weaning to 2 years of age, the horse may nearly double its weight.

Weanlings and yearlings benefit from a diet containing 14-16% protein. They also require readily available sources of energy to meet the demands of growth and activity. The percent of concentrates or roughage in the diets depends on the desired growth rate. However the diet should never contain less than 30% as roughage- measured by weight.

A good rule of thumb is to provide 60-70 % ration as concentrates and 30% ration as roughage-measured by weight. The diet must also provide fibre to keep the digestive tract functioning properly. Some of the new complete feeds have the ration already balanced.

Weight gain tapers off as the horse matures. As growth slows, you will need to adjust the feeding to 1.5-2 % of the yearling's body weight. The grain and roughage ratio should also be adjusted so that by the time the horse is a 2 year old, half of its daily diet (by weight) is coming from grain sources and the other half from hay and grass. Breed type, maturity, desired growth rate/condition and level of activity will affect the horse's exact nutritional requirements.

TOTAL CARE AND MANAGEMENT.

Work with Ballybrown Equine Clinic to develop a total health care plan for your foals, weanlings, and yearlings. A regular deworming, vaccination and exam schedule is essential to ensure your animals are getting the care they need. Here are some management tips:

- Unless there is a medical concern, provide youngsters free choice exercise daily. The less time foals are confined to stalls, the better.
- Use lunging gradually and with caution. Excessive forced work can strain joints and limbs.
- Never exercise a foal to the point of fatigue.
- Keep foals' feet trimmed properly.
- Provide a clean, safe environment with adequate shelter for the elements.
- Check the horse's surroundings and eliminate any potential hazards such as loose boards, nails, wire, fencing or equipment.

The reward in providing excellent nutrition, conscientious care and a safe environment will be a healthy foal that grows into a sound and useful horse.