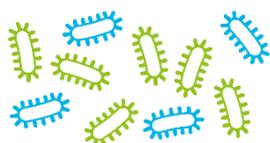


Getting it right: Weaning

The weaning process has been reported in recent research as one of the most stressful events in a horse's life (Mach et al 2017). Nutritional mistakes at early life stages can lead to structural problems that may limit performance potential. During weaning, excess energy is utilised, and a temporary period of decrease weight can be observed. Weaning affects physiological, nutritional and cognitive – behavioural responses. Inadequate nutrition to weanlings has shown to be associated with higher risks of Development Orthopaedic Diseases (DOD).

Stress

An increase in stress hormones are prevalent throughout the weaning period, however these will vary in level and duration, according to the weaning process used. Stress hormones have been reported to impact negatively on the gastrointestinal tract, specifically the intestinal microbiome, which can lead to potential growth of harmful organisms such as Escherichia Coli. Both progressive and abrupt weaning methods contribute stress levels to the foals, pre-weaning and post weaning management is a vital for foal development during these periods.



Stress hormones negatively affect the levels of intestinal microbiota in the weaning

Management

According to The National Research Council (NRC) Guidelines, foals gain an average 0.8kg per day. A diet must meet or exceed to NRC recommendations for energy, protein, calcium and phosphorus. A forage only diet for growing foals is unlikely to meet these requirements as forage is a low source of lysine, an essential amino acid for growth. Most foals are gradually introduced to concentrates through eating small amounts from the mares feed. Before weaning, providing concentrates to the foal will aid management and help to avoid large weight loss and lower the risk of DOD.

Post weaning, keeping a routine record of condition score and weight helps to highlight growth concerns before they become detrimental.

“Steady, Sound Growth”

Post Weaning Mare

Weaning for mares is not considered to be as stressful, particularly those that have previous offspring. However, attention should be given to the nutritional changes required by the mare. Some may be pregnant during the weaning process and therefore it is highly important to ensure nutritional imbalances do not occur. The absence of concentrates during weaning can result in a slow down of milk production. Decreasing milk production as quickly as possible will keep the mare comfortable and reduce the risk of health issues such as mastitis.

Providing high quality forage until milk production ceases should be sufficient in most cases, however the addition of a balancer, such as Stamm 30, will provide additional proteins, vitamins and minerals necessary, specially to those mares that are pregnant.

Monitoring

Good management practises post weaning involves keeping a regular record of weight, condition score and health checks for both mare and foals.

The utilisation of a growth track software such as Gro-Trac, is a useful aid to identify potential growth rate abnormalities. Gro-Trac allows users to compare data of foals from across the world. It is a helpful tool for the prevention of detrimental problems occurring in foals, especially during the weaning process when weight gain and loss is fluctuated. For more information on Gro-Trac contact Bluegrass Horse Feed.



Equineews. (2017). *Stress of Weaning Impacts Digestive Health of Foals*. [online] Available at: <http://bluegrass.equineews.com/article/stress-weaning-impacts-digestive-health-foals>

Equineews. (2016). *Plan Ahead for Weaning Foals*. [online] Available at: <http://bluegrass.equineews.com/article/plan-ahead-weaning-foals>

Mach,N,A. Foury, S. Kittelmann, et all. 2017. The effects pf weaning on gut microbiota composition and horse physiology.

