

Creep Feeding Foals

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One of the most important advantages of creep feeding is being able to accustom foals to eating concentrates before they are weaned. Foals that have been provided with creep feed for a period of several weeks prior to weaning generally eat better after weaning, and may be less susceptible to the stresses of weaning than foals that have not been so fed. Providing supplemental feed in a creep feeder for foals is preferential to having the foal eat the dam's concentrate because the foal's requirements relative to its energy needs are higher than those of the dam.

If during nursing, supplemental feed is not consumed, then following weaning when an adequate diet is consumed, a compensatory growth spurt may occur. This growth spurt greatly increases the risk of developmental orthopaedic disease (DOD) occurrence and severity. If the foal has been on a good creep-feeding program, this growth spurt, and as a result the risk of DOD may be reduced.

Notes on creep feeding:

- The creep feeder should be strategically located near places that mares frequent, such as watering or feeding areas, and should be designed to allow the foal access to the feed in a safe manner without injury. Observations indicate that foals graze only when their mothers do and are more likely to eat, at least initially, when they see their mothers eating.
- Foals may have to be shown how to enter and eat from a creep feeder. Often confining several foals inside a feeder for a few minutes, showing them the creep feed and putting some in their mouths to get them started eating is adequate so they will act as teachers for the remaining foals.
- If the mare is in a stall, she can be tied and a separate feeder can be provided for the foal. Alternatively a stout board can be placed across one corner of the stall so that the foal can walk under the board. A height of about 137cm for light breeds is usually adequate.
- The bucket containing the supplemental feeds for suckling foals should be cleaned and filled at least once daily, more often if weather and other conditions indicate.
- Once the foal is eating 2-2.5kg, the amount of entirely grain mix creep feed fed may need to be restricted so that growth rates do not become excessive. Prior to this time, there should always be feed in the creep feeder. Most foals will eat small amounts frequently.
- Clean water should always be made available to the foals who are not milking, as they would normally receive their water intakes via the mare's milk.
- After 4 months of age, the foal can be fed as a normal weanling.
- In addition to creep feed, good-quality hay or pasture forage should be available by at least 1 month of age for the foal to eat all that it wants. Occasionally a young foal will overeat good-quality palatable legume forage and develop a loose or watery stool, particularly if adequate milk isn't available. This may be corrected by ensuring that adequate creep feed and milk are fed and limiting forage intake until stools firm up.

References:

Lewis, L. (1995). Equine Clinical Nutrition, Feeding and Care. Williams and Wilkins.