

Retained Placenta

Whilst a foal is *in utero* it is surrounded by a tissue sack called the placenta. This structure allows transfer of nutrients and waste products between mare and foal and protects the foal from the mare's immune system. During the process of foaling the placenta ruptures, allowing the foal out. The placenta is usually passed within 1 hour of the birth of the foal and is considered retained after three hours. This is a relatively common occurrence and can be a genuine veterinary emergency. **If your mare has not passed the placenta within three hours of foaling you should phone the vet immediately.**

Why is a retained placenta a problem?

If the placenta, or any part of it, is not expelled from the uterus it can rapidly become infected. A result of this is toxin production from bacteria that can be absorbed from the uterus into the horse's bloodstream. This can result in septicaemia, septic shock and laminitis in addition to infection of the uterus, so can be a life threatening problem. In addition a sick horse may not produce sufficient colostrum for her foal or be able to take care of the foal properly and uterine infection or damage may result in reduced fertility in the future.

What causes the placenta to be retained?

The placenta is often retained following a difficult or protracted foaling but can occur after normal foalings too. Uterine inertia (failure of uterine contractions) is often present, perhaps due to hormone imbalances. Lack of some minerals, such as selenium, has also been implicated as a possible reason for placenta retention.

How can it be treated?

In some cases the placenta can be removed through manual traction, where the placenta is gently withdrawn from the uterus with steady pressure. Using this technique great care must be taken that the placenta does not rip, potentially leaving remnants of the placenta within the uterus. A drug called Oxytocin may be given by injection into either the muscle or the vein. This drug encourages the uterus to contract and so the placenta may be expelled naturally. In some circumstances the placenta may be filled with warm water to distend it and cause detachment from the uterus. Rarely, the placenta cannot be removed by any of these means. In these cases the uterus is often washed out with warm water to remove toxins and antibiotics may be instilled into the uterus. In addition systemic antibiotics may be given and drugs to combat toxins in the bloodstream. After a period of several hours further attempts are made to remove the placenta.

Aftercare may include further uterine lavage, oxytocin injections, antibiotics and clinical examinations and assessment of the uterus.

If your mare has foaled and the placenta has not been expelled after 3 hours, or if the placenta is torn or cannot be found, please contact the clinic for veterinary advice immediately.