

# Red Bag DELIVERY

A red bag delivery is an emergency. Learn how to respond to save your foal.

By Katie Navarra

For nearly a year you've been waiting for the day your new foal will arrive. Whether you have one expectant mother or a barn full, this is your first or 21st foal, each holds the promise of dreams waiting to be fulfilled. You carefully selected the stallion, provided proper nutrition and required veterinary care. Now you're anxiously awaiting the hour the little colt or filly will arrive.

For the most part, Mother Nature does her job, and a healthy foal is attempting to stand within its first hour of life. But just as in humans, there is the chance that the delivery doesn't go according to plan.

A red bag delivery is one of several complications that can occur during foaling. Without immediate intervention, the foal will suffer from a lack of oxygen, known as hypoxia, or may die of asphyxiation.

## What is Red Bag Delivery?

In veterinary terms, a red bag delivery is called premature placental separation. In a study from 2012, the rate of incidence was 1.6 percent out of 1,047 births, said Patrick M. McCue, DVM, Ph.D., Diplomate ACT a professor at Colorado State University's equine reproduction lab. It's largely unknown what causes a premature placenta separation.

"Sometimes it can happen because of a thickened placenta, fescue toxicity and stress, but many times the reason is unknown," he said.

While a red bag delivery can be deadly for a foal, there aren't many risks for the mare aside from the typical foaling side effects of bruising, vaginal tearing, etc. And as far as veterinarians can tell, there aren't any risks to future pregnancies.

There are no warning signs to tip you off that something is amiss. It's only observable at the time of delivery. The

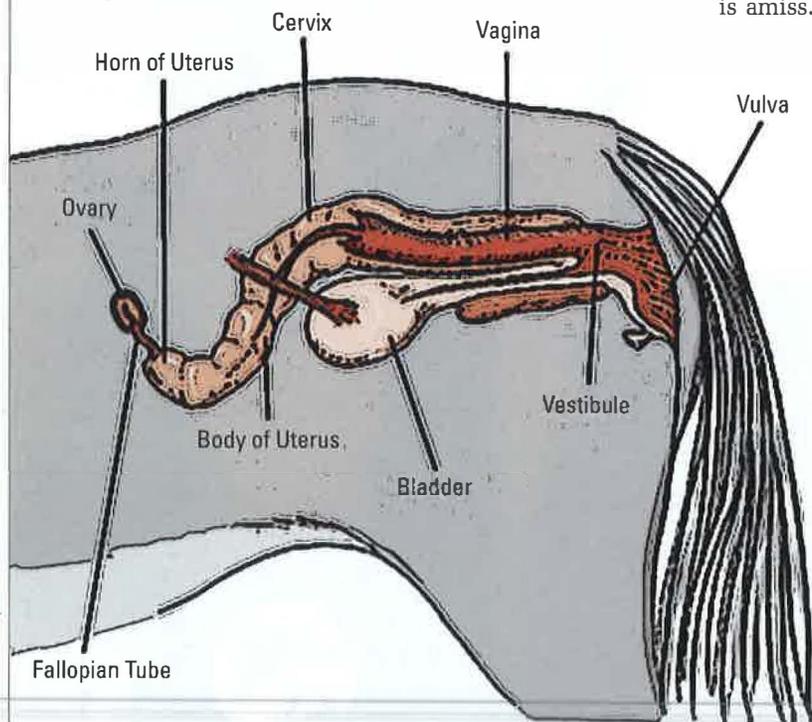
fact that most mares foal at night complicates the situation. McCue said that 93 percent of mares foal between 9:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m., with the majority around midnight. Consequently, that is when there is the highest risk for red bag deliveries. Since premature placenta separation provides no early signals, McCue encourages horse handlers to keep mares in a foaling stall for easy observation and a quick response if needed.

"If a mare is out in the pasture and has a red bag delivery there's no chance the foal will survive," he said.

## Identifying Red Bag Delivery

Recognizing the signs and taking action to save a foal during a red bag delivery begins with understanding the anatomical structures associated with the delivery process.

The placenta transfers nutrients and



oxygen between the mare and the fetus, explained Dr. McCue. It is comprised of two parts. The chorioallantois, which attaches to the uterus and the amnion, which is the membrane that surrounds the fetus. During a normal delivery the mare's uterine contractions increase in magnitude, and the resulting pressure on the uterus ruptures the placenta. This tear occurs at the cervical star, the spot that opens into the birth canal. The rupture causes the "water break" or the release of the large quantity of allantoic fluid. In a typical scenario the contractions continue, and the foal is pushed out of the birth canal.

"During red bag delivery the outer placental membrane stays intact, but the connecting tissues start to let go and the intact placenta containing the foal gets pushed out," Dr. McCue explained.

Instead of seeing a thin, transparent, greyish-white membrane and a release of fluids, the foaling attendant will see a red, velvet appearing placenta, the "red bag." This is an indication that the delivery is not proceeding as normal, and action is needed. When the placenta detaches from the uterus but is unbroken, the foal is left without an oxygen source since the placenta's attachment to the uterus facilitates oxygen transfer among other functions.

"The placenta's contact with the uterus is decreased by 30 to 50 percent in this situation," he said.

The normal delivery averages 17 minutes but can range from 10 to 20 minutes. During a red bag delivery every second counts. A foaling attendant or mare owner needs to be able to recognize the signs and react quickly.

Foal survival depends on early recognition and accurate decision making and proximity to help either on the farm, in the house or through the facility's veterinary service.

"Cutting the membrane with a sharp knife or pair of scissors is essentially breaking the mare's water and facilitating a rapid delivery."

## Be Prepared

Preparation plays a critical role in saving a foal during a red bag delivery. Dr. McCue recommends meeting with your veterinarian at the beginning of the foaling season to talk about potential complications and to create a foaling plan.

"The plan should establish good communication between mare owner, barn staff and veterinarian and identify when calls need to be made," he said.

The discussion with the veterinarian should also include guidance as to what signs to look for during difficult births, medically called dystocia. Specifically, learn what a normal delivery process looks like as well as the abnormal red bag delivery. Dr. McCue hosted three Facebook live discussions

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that are available on Colorado State University Equine Reproduction Lab's Facebook page. The series covers how to predict foaling time, explains normal and difficult birth scenarios and how to care for the newborn foal. These aired January 30, 31 and February 1 respectively.

"Understand what you are looking for, the natural delivery progression and clinical signs in a mare and when to make appropriate decisions," he said.

Keep a fully stocked foaling kit immediately outside each foaling stall. A sharp knife or a pair of scissors is most important for assisting in a red bag delivery. The college also provided a comprehensive list and recommendations for purchasing supplies on its Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/csuequinereproductionlab/photos/pcb.1703993252999453/1703991382999640/?type=3&theater](http://www.facebook.com/csuequinereproductionlab/photos/pcb.1703993252999453/1703991382999640/?type=3&theater).

Because premature placenta separation is not visible until delivery, there aren't steps a mare owner can take to prevent the situation. Taking the time to learn the normal delivery process and what signposts to watch for could mean the difference between life and death during red bag deliveries. 🐾

*Katie Navarra is a professional writer based in Upstate New York. She has been a lifelong horse lover and competes in ranch horse events with her dun Quarter Horse mare.*

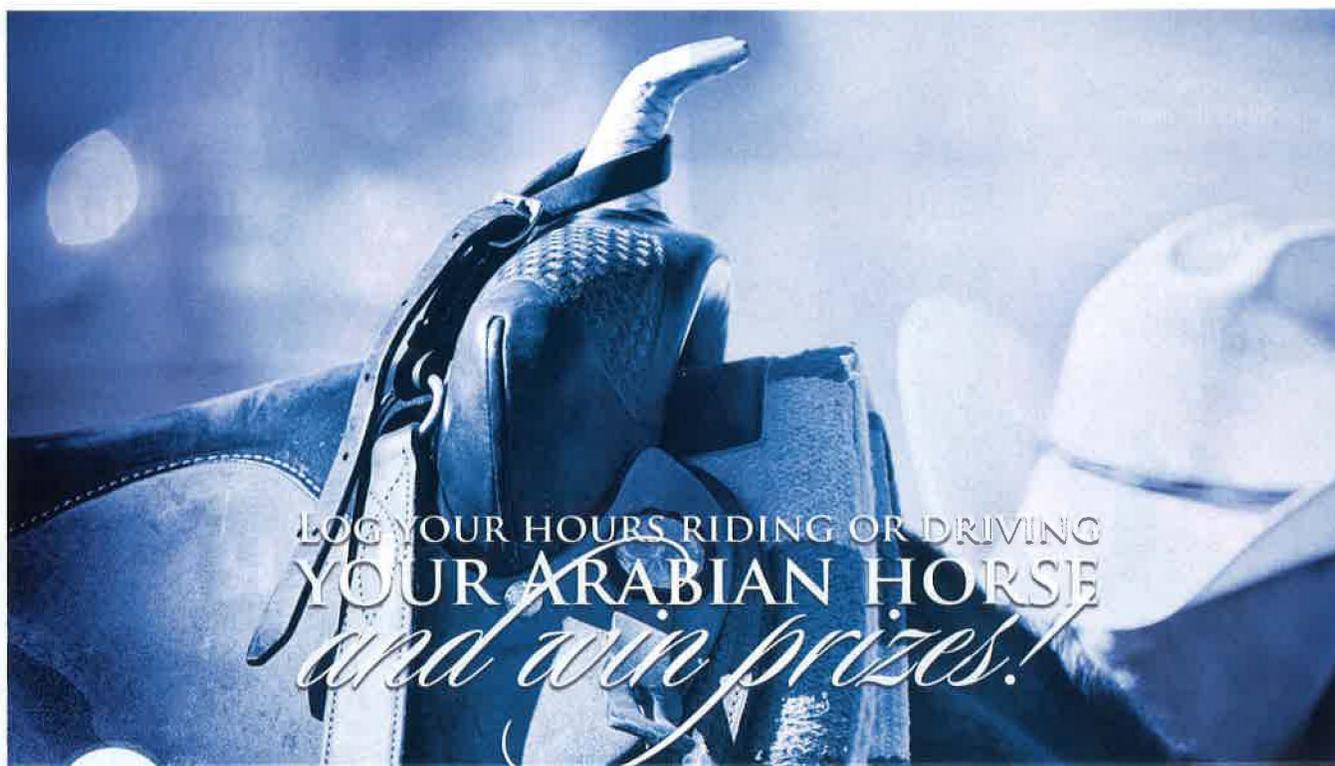


In a normal birth, the mare breaks her water which releases allantoic fluid, and the greyish-white amnion is visible.



Premature placental separation is seen as a "red bag" and is an emergency situation.

Photos courtesy of Dr. Patrick McCue, Colorado State University



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