

Foals of Non-Milking Mares

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I have a gorgeous palomino Quarter Horse mare that I would like to breed, but I have a problem. She ran into barbed wire as a yearling and she cannot produce milk as a result of that accident. The man who owned her before bred her twice, and he bottle-fed the babies and they did fine. I really want a foal out of this mare, but I am wondering if it is worth it to breed her with her problem. I was wondering what my options would be as far as caring for the foal, how I would go about caring for it, and if you knew about how much all of it would cost in the long run to care for her foal? *Jessica, North Carolina*

It's a big job to hand feed a foal. Most people I know who have done it in emergency situations say they would not opt to do it electively. The foal will need colostrum within the first few hours of birth, which you can get frozen ahead of time from many breeding farms that bank it for emergencies. The foal will do best if fed small amounts of a milk replacer formulated especially for the nutritional requirements of a foal. And it will need to be fed milk every two to three hours around the clock for the first week or so, then every four hours, and then at least every six to eight hours after that until weaning. You can arrange to get both the colostrum and the milk replacer ahead of foaling time, so there won't be the hassle of finding it in a hurry that most people face. At about a month of age, creep feeding can be started with a specially formulated pellet preparation designed for the young foal's nutritional needs.

Aside from the work of frequent feedings, there are other worries when hand-rearing foals. Foals that are hand-fed tend to have bouts of diarrhea, and most don't seem to thrive as well as foals that are fed by mares. So these foals need closer watch by a veterinarian and might need some treatment. Also, with the intense interaction with humans and the association with feeding, many hand-fed foals appear to become too attached to the people who feed them, even when they live with their moms. They are difficult to handle, acting as if they perceive you as a horse. They might be pushy and more aggressive than is safe (see Further Reading at the end of the article).

Feeding from a bucket rather than a bottle can likely reduce the risk of this abnormal behavior. In the case of your foal that will not be an orphan and can stay with its mom, there is also much less chance of the abnormal behavior than occurs when the foal is not with a mare. Check out previous articles in *The Horse* on behavior and hand-rearing of foals (see Further Reading).

The costs of hand-feeding include colostrum (which is usually free or inexpensive from a sympathetic breeder with plenty in stock), milk replacer (up to \$1,000 or more), and vet checks to evaluate and treat diarrhea and other health problems that tend to come up more often with a hand-fed foal.

One practical and probably less expensive option to hand-feeding is a nurse mare. This is a mare whose own foal is weaned so she can be given a new foal. There are farms that specialize in providing nurse mares that are known to be good foster moms. Nurse mare providers are usually skilled in fostering techniques. They can advise you on how to get the mare to accept your foal. Also, they often come with the mare to make sure she and the foal get along well. Since you know ahead of time that you will need a nurse mare, you can get it all organized. This will save the emergency rush and will enable you to foster the foal immediately, which will usually make the foster bonding quicker.

Foals develop very well physically and behaviorally with nurse mares. The cost of renting a foster mare varies around the country, but I have heard figures of about \$500-\$1,000, and you are typically required to return the mare pregnant so that she will have another foal and be ready as a nurse mare the next year. So, the cost includes the rental of the mare, her transportation to and from your facility,

her feeding and care for three to six months until your foal is weaned, and one or more breeding services and vet costs to get the nurse mare pregnant again (usually any ordinary stallion is acceptable to the nurse mare provider; most farms use the teaser stallion).

When using a nurse mare, your mare will need to be separated from her foal soon after birth so that the bonding of the new pair goes well. For most people who appreciate a mare's good maternal behavior, this can be difficult emotionally. However, your mare will likely get over any signs of the loss of her foal within a couple of days (see Further Reading).

Embryo transfer is another option. It would avoid the work of hand-feeding and would also avoid the added risk of physical or behavior problems common in hand-fed foals, and the step of separating your mare from her newly born foal. For embryo transfer, your mare gets bred to the stallion of your choice. Then at about eight days after ovulation, the embryo is flushed from her uterus and transferred into the uterus of another mare (called the recipient). The recipient mare has been synchronized to your mare (the donor mare) by treatment with hormones so that her estrous cycle, uterus, and hormones are ready to receive an embryo. Embryo transfer is usually done at a specialized facility.

Once the recipient mare is confirmed to be pregnant, your mare is returned to you and the recipient mare can be kept at the facility or sent to your farm, where she carries the pregnancy and delivers and cares for the foal. The preparation of the mares and the transfer procedure cost varies around the country, and usually runs \$2,000-\$10,000 or more. Then you usually lease or buy the recipient mare and take over her care for as long as you have her.

FURTHER READING

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Sellnow, L. "Life Without Mom." *The Horse*, July 2003, pp. 39-46.
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**Readers are cautioned to seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian
before proceeding with any diagnosis, treatment, or therapy.**



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