Feeding the Growing Foal

Now that the foals are weaned and the mares are turned out to pasture, we can turn our attention to providing the youngsters with the nutrition they need for optimal growth and development. What is optimal growth? After we develop a feeding program, we will discuss some of the guidelines for measuring the foal's progress.

During the first year, the foal can receive up to one per cent (1%) of its body weight in grain. This feed should have 16% protein but not more than 3% fat. These feeds are usually high in fiber to prevent the foal from becoming fat while still providing it with the essential vitamins and minerals for growth. Foals rarely founder from being overfed, but those on a high grain ration are at risk of developing orthopedic (bone) problems. Those foals with some thoroughbred breeding in the family tree are at the greatest risk of these problems, due to the very rapid growth of their bones.

Those foals fed one per cent of their body weight (four pounds per day for the 400 lb. foal) should have little problems with these conditions. They gain about two pounds per day for the first six months of their life, and from one to one and one half pounds per day for the last six months of that first year.

If the foal is on good pasture they may only need a small amount of alfalfa hay to balance out the roughage intake. If pasture is not available, free choice grass hay will be fine. Alfalfa hay can be fed *but should not exceed one half per cent* of the body weight (two pounds per day for the 400 lb. foal) due to its effect on bone development.

After the foal completes one year of age, there is little chance of orthopedic problems. Should there be a reason to feed the yearling more heavily--in order to condition them for show or sale--it can be done without risk to future bone development. The same is true with the use of alfalfa hay.

By the end of the first year, the foal has reached 90% of its height. The only exception is the foal that has been nutritionally deprived (starved) and its growth stunted. Mother Nature watches out for these foals with a condition called compensatory growth. With proper feeding during the second year, the foal's compensatory growth will approach--but probably not completely achieve (depending on the extent of the stunted growth)--its full genetic height.

The one-year-old foal has only reached two thirds of what will be the mature weight. After the second year it will reach 90% of its weight, it will take another two years to reach its full potential weight.

Next week we will discuss parameters for measuring a foal's growth and, more interestingly, predicting its future growth.