​It’s foaling time. Unfortunately, sometimes this exciting time can turn tragic, because some foals get sick, and some of those foals don’t make it. As with everything else in veterinary medicine, it’s clear that the most effective strategies revolve around keeping the new babies from *getting*sick in the first place and ensuring they remain as healthy as possible.

**Goal No. 1: Prevent the foal from getting infected in the first place.**Preventing infections in foals mostly involves a lot of washing. No mystery detergents needed—just soap, water, and some elbow grease. Clean up the mare before she foals. Wash her backside thoroughly to remove manure, which, of course, is full of bacteria.

1. Clean up the mare after she foals, when the baby is still on the ground. Doing the job twice is important. Cleaning the mare before the baby comes through the birth canal helps prevent the foal from being exposed to bacteria, and cleaning the mare after the baby comes through the birth canal helps remove all of the bacteria that the foal will nurse, sniff, and nuzzle from his mother.
2. Thoroughly clean the mare’s udder in order to remove bacteria-laden smegma. It’s easiest to clean the udder if it’s full—all the cracks and crevices are spread out. For safety’s sake, it’s good practice to get the mare accustomed to having her udder cleaned prior to foaling

**Goal No. 2: Pay close attention to the umbilical cord**

1. The umbilical cord should be allowed to break on its own. It will break when it’s supposed to break.
2. Once the cord breaks, it’s good practice to disinfect the umbilical remnant in a disinfectant solution. The best thing in which to dip it is a 0.5 percent solution of chlorhexidine. Plain iodine—which has been commonly used for decades—is too caustic and can be difficult to obtain. Conversely, povidone-iodine (“tamed” iodine) is too weak to be effective. Chlorhexidine usually comes as a 2 or 4 percent solution, so it’s easy to make a 0.5 percent solution. The umbilicus should be dipped every six hours for the first day, a total of 4 times in 24 hours.

**Goal No. 3: Strengthen the foal’s immunity**
​Newborn foals are immunologically naïve. As soon as they are born, they immediately are exposed to a smorgasbord of microorganisms that can make them very sick unless that naiveté is addressed. The first milk of the mare—the colostrum—is a temporary immunological shield for the newborn foal. It’s important that it drink as much colostrum as it can, as soon as it can. The foal only has about 24 hours before its intestinal tract becomes unable to absorb immunoglobulins from the mare’s colostrum. In order to start the foal off right, it’s not a bad idea to milk the mare and feed the baby 4 to 8 ounces of colostrum from a bottle, even before the foal has learned to stand. The foal should have a strong suckle reflex. It’s actually easier to get the foal to drink while it’s on the ground (it’s hard for the foal to do two things at once at this stage). While the foal is being given colostrum, it’s important that the foal is not made to stretch its head up to drink. Doing so can potentially allow colostrum to run down into the lungs and set up conditions for pneumonia.

**Goal No. 4: Ensure vigor and vitality**
Healthy foals act like healthy foals, that is, they’re excited— almost impatient—to get on with life. Here are a few things to look for to ensure that the foal is off to a healthy start.

* 1 to 5 minutes after birth: The foal’s respiration rate should be more than 60 breaths per minute. Count the rate while auscultating the foal during the postnatal exam. Instruct clients to count respirations by counting the inand-out movements of the rib cage.
* Straw inserted into the foal’s nose should elicit a vigorous sneeze. I mean, would you like a piece of straw stuck up your nose?
* The foal should be sitting on its chest, with both feet forward, in sternal position. This is important. Sternal position helps open the foal’s chest, allowing for maximum tidal volume at inspiration, and maximum oxygenation. This is no trivial suggestion. When babies are on their side their right after birth, their oxygen levels drop about 40 percent. In sternal position, that level increases 40 percent.
* Within 1 to 2 hours after birth: The baby should be standing (it’s often faster than that).
* Within 2 to 3 hours after birth: The baby should be nursing (it’s often faster than that).
* The mare should expel her placenta. If it’s not expelled within that time, a veterinarian should be in attendance as soon as possible. Retained placenta in the mare is a serious problem that can result in serious sequelae, such as endometritis or laminitis.
* John Madigan, DVM, professor of equine medicine at the University of California, Davis, has written an excellent book about the ins and outs of foaling. The book, The Manual of Neonatal Medicine, is now in its fourth edition, and is a practical resource for anyone involved in neonatal medicine.
* Nothing is cuter than a newborn foal, and ensuring its healthy start is well worth the time and effort. There’s usually a good deal of time and money invested in a new foal, and an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. ●

Dr. David W. Ramey is a Southern California equine practitioner who specializes in the care and treatment of pleasure horses.