

The Importance of Foal Milk Replacer

Not just for emergencies anymore.

By Robert Fera, Equine Specialist

When the topic of milk replacer comes up we think of its use for orphaned foals in traumatic situations where replacing milk is of the utmost urgency. While this remains a valid reason, milk replacers have been becoming more useful and prominent with breeders today.

From a product application standpoint, I will discuss the importance of foal milk replacers in its other uses.

Foal milk replacers closely match that of mares milk and in some cases where mares milk is of questionable quality it will surpass it. It is important to consider a milk replacer made with 100% milk sources as this would be consistent and more readily digestible by the foal. Milk replacers are formulated to provide the optimal balance between energy, protein and fat requirements with the addition of minerals and vitamins for the foal. These optimal rations contribute to the health, development and immune status of the foal.

The thought of giving a healthy looking foal a jump start to life with a few days of quality milk replacer should not be dismissed. Foals with inadequate energy and nutrition will have the potential for decreased growth, poor health and the inability to overcome stress and illness.

The first few weeks of a foal's life are critical, and the importance of optimizing growth and immune functions are important for growth and development of the newborn foal. Subsequently providing foal milk replacer to newborn foals will give them the added energy and nutrition they need. Foals are born without fat stores and their energy stores will rapidly deplete if not provided with enough energy to meet their needs. Of course in the perfect world foals rely totally on their mother's milk which is fine as long as foals are consuming 5 to 10% of their body weight in milk on the first days of life and increasing to 20 % of their body weight in milk based on age. Energy shortage in foals may consequently lead to health disorders and delayed development.

In addition to giving the foal a good head start other areas where milk replacer would be of benefit would include:

- Helping a mare out who is sick and may not be able to provide all the milk the foal requires. Furthermore by providing the foal with milk replacer supplementation will allow the mare to not be worn down by nursing and having the foal use up the sick mare's energy stores that she requires to recover.
- Mares with inadequate milk or have been tested to have poor quality milk based on many factors such as age, illness, and nutritional status while pregnant. Foals would positively benefit from supplementation with milk replacer to correct milk deficiencies from the mare.
- Giving sick and convalescing foals extra energy to fight illness and provide them with a consistent fortified source of fat, protein and fibre.
- Maiden mares- unsure of nutritional profile of mare's milk- using milk replacer to 'top up' the nutrition offered to the foal.

In addition to the above mentioned reasons for supplementing with a high quality milk replacer, there of course is the reason of the orphan foal that will require milk. Of course nurse mares may provide milk but supplementation with milk replacer will guarantee a consistent quality of nutrients for the foal to optimize development.

If no nurse mares are used and the foal is hand reared do not be discouraged. "Foals fed milk replacer only, had caught up to mare nursed foals by four months of age and normal growth rates of foals occur when milk replacer and good quality feeds are fed concurrently." (Can Vet Journal Volume 34, Aug. 1993.) Additionally, milk replacer offers a nutritional profile that is consistent- the profile of the milk from a nurse mare is dependent on the stage of lactation.

Feeds to feed concurrently with milk replacers include foal milk pellets which are an excellent starting ration then moving to a high quality foal ration.

As with any feeding program results of the above mentioned supplementation of milk replacer will vary depending on management environment, genetic and health differences. Please consult your veterinarian for assistance and remember with the time and energy you spend on developing your foal it is important to get it right from the start. Providing for a foal doesn't end at foaling time it is only the beginning, and milk replacer is an excellent way of supplementing and giving that foal the healthy start it deserves.