

# STRESS-FREE WEANING:

## is it possible?

*The weaning process is an important step in every foal's life—but there's probably not a breeder out there who enjoys the process. Good planning and strategy can minimize the stress of weaning, which ultimately benefits the foal, the mare and the owner. Knowing some of the logic and the reasoning behind the different weaning methods can help you to make the weaning process as healthy and stress-free as possible for your foal and mare.*



By Gigha Steinman

### When to Wean

Most experts tend to recommend weaning foals when they are five or six months old, although a few suggest waiting until the foal is closer to seven months old and some feel there is no real harm in weaning a foal as young as four months old. (In contrast a foal in the wild may likely stay at his dam's side for a full year, until the next foal is born.)

Keeping a foal with his mother allows him to develop socially and emotionally, and most importantly allows his digestive system to develop so he is ready to transition from his mother's milk to grains and forage. Most foals will be ready physically to be weaned from their mothers by the time they are four months old, but most experts feel the weaning process is less stressful for the foal if he can be left with his mother for another month or two.

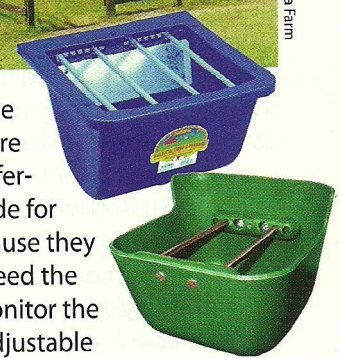
For the first two months of a foal's life his mother's milk will meet most, if not all, of his nutritional needs, and his digestive system will not yet be able to really digest forage or grains. Once the foal is two months old he will have begun consuming more grass and hay, and he will probably be sneaking bites from his mother's feed as well. By the time a foal is three to four months old he will begin to better digest grains, nonstructural carbohydrates and forage. Around this same time the mare's milk production and quality will have begun to decrease and will no longer be sufficient to maintain the foal's growth.

Once a foal is two to three months old many breeders will begin "creep feeding" him. Creep feeding refers to the

method of feeding the foal small amounts of feed in frequent intervals, and there are a myriad of feeds specially formulated for growing foals. To insure the foal gets his intended food and you are able to monitor how much he eats, it will be important that the mare cannot get to his food. There are different variations of special buckets made for this purpose which are popular because they allow the caregiver the freedom to feed the foal and leave, without having to monitor the mare. These buckets usually have adjustable bars which can be spaced closer together or farther apart as needed, so the foal can reach the feed but the spacing will be too small for the mare's muzzle to fit. Foals may also be able to obtain adequate nutrition by sharing from their mother's bucket, but it is harder to monitor how much the foal is eating, and often the mare's feed may not be the optimal feed choice for the foal.



Courtesy Buena Vista Farm



**TOP:** Love at first sight! Just weaned, these two meet for the first time. On the left is the colt Dragon by Don Schufro out of Walkaway, owned by Crystal Lee. On the right is Synchronicity owned by Meredith Crawford. She is by Staccato out of Evita. **ABOVE RIGHT:** An outdoor creep feeder at Buena Vista Farm in Ocala, Florida; and: two examples of creep feed buckets for foals.



Younger foals nurse more frequently than older foals. This youngster is so anxious to nurse he won't even let his mother finish her nap—he would be quite upset to be weaned now!

There are other types of creep feeders, such as actual structures with smaller doorways that only allow the foal to enter and exit on his own with mom nearby, so that the foal can eat his special feed safely on his own.

## Preparing to Wean

A foal should be eating feed and forage on his own before he is weaned. Depending on the age of the foal, most foals will have already been vaccinated prior to weaning, and all foals should already be on a de-worming program. Due to the stress that weaning can cause the foal, this is not the time to introduce feed for the first time and it is also not a good time to vaccinate your foal or de-worm him for the first time. Stress can contribute to colic or the development of gastric ulcers, so it is best to aim to keep the foal's stressors to a minimum during weaning.

Many experts also recommend significantly reducing the amount fed to the mare a few days prior to weaning, to help her body reduce milk production (referred to as "drying up"). This is more important when weaning a younger foal rather than an older foal, because the mare's milk production will have reduced significantly on its own by the time the foal is six or seven months old. It is also important to monitor the mare after weaning as some mares may develop mastitis, which is a serious infection of the mammary gland. The best preventative measure for mastitis in broodmares is for them to dry up as quickly as possible after weaning, which is why cutting their feed is often recommended.

## Weaning Methods

First, it's important to review the area to be used for weaning: stall, paddock or pasture. Is it safe and sturdy? Foals that become anxious when they are separated from their mothers may crawl under fences, crash through fences, or jump over fences or stall doors to return to their mothers. Decrepit fencing and/or stabling could increase the odds of injury should a foal decide to escape, and fences or stall doors which are too low could encourage unwanted jumping.

The most controversial aspect of weaning is "when," and the second most controversial aspect is "how." There are a variety of methods and combinations of methods. Some are considered less stressful; some are more time consuming and labor intensive. The facility (size, layout and resources), available man-power and the time schedule are all factors which may influence which method of weaning works best.

The **immediate separation** or "cold turkey" method of weaning is one of the most common approaches to weaning. Some experts believe this to be the most stressful method of weaning, especially for younger foals. However, the stress of "cold turkey" weaning can be mitigated significantly by waiting until the foal is a month or two older or by weaning him cold turkey with a buddy (such as another foal, a friendly gelding or a retired broodmare.)

Tashlin Jeffries breeds Friesians and Friesian Sporthorses at her farm Kendall Park in Australia. She uses the immediate separation method, but is careful to wait until she feels the foal is ready for weaning. "I watch the foals and judge when they are independent enough, a good size and good health, etc., and by this stage they are generally not really fussed when their mother is taken away," she says. When she removes the foal from the mare she puts him in a small safe paddock with a buddy or two. "I've never had an issue weaning if done with familiar friends and feed. The most a young foal may call is a few hours in the first evening, and that's about it. They don't lose their appetite because they see their friend eating so they are still competitive and don't want to miss out on the food."

**Pasture (group) weaning** is another of the most common approaches. This method is used for groups of mares and foals who already share a pasture together. Mares will be removed one at a time, eventually leaving the foals with only each other for company. This method of weaning is a sort of variation on the "immediate separation with a buddy" method.

Tricia Veley uses this method when weaning foals at her First Flight Farm in Texas. She hosts annual Holsteiner and Oldenburg GOV inspections and likes to wait to wean her foals until after the last inspection. "I like to wean them all at the same time," she remarks. "By waiting until after the inspections it is usually mid September and the foals are already five months old or older on average, and by then they're mostly on their own anyhow except for occasional nursing."

When it comes time to wean, Tricia will remove the mares and put them in a different pasture, not adjoining their foals. She watches the foals carefully when they are first weaned and will remove one and put him in a stall if he seems agitated, but observes that this method mostly works well for her. "The biggest challenge has been some of the jumper-bred foals who think the 5-foot fence is nothing, so if they jump out or look like they might, I'll put them in a stall with a neighbor until they settle down."

**Interval weaning** involves separating the mare and foal for a period of time, and then reuniting them. The intervals when they are apart will gradually increase over the course of



Two happy weaned foals at First Flight Farm in Texas.

five to ten days, until ultimately the separation becomes permanent. While this is considered to be one of the least stressful methods of weaning, it is also the most labor intensive and time consuming and is therefore less common.

**Incomplete separation** is similar to immediate separation except that the newly separated mares and foals will share a common fence. This allows them to see, hear and communicate with each other, but the foal will not be able to nurse. The foal is free to run off and play with his buddies and build his confidence and independence, but when he wants the comfort of his mother he can still find her. Assuming of course that the mare isn't so glad to be free of her youngster that she retreats to the far side of the field and won't answer the whinnies of her foal!

Mo Swanson breeds Hanoverians and Oldenburgs (GOV) at her Rolling Stone Farm in Pennsylvania. She has large foal crops—26 foals in 2014—and uses the incomplete separation method. She weans all of the foals at the same time after Dressage at Devon, usually in the beginning of October. "By then all of the foals are eating grain out of their mothers' feed buckets and are pretty independent, playing most of the day with their friends and only coming to mom for an occasional quick drink," says Mo. "The foals can see their mothers and stand next to them on the other side of the fence, but they cannot nurse through the fence. This method cuts down on the frantic screaming of both mares and foals that complete separation can sometimes bring. After a while the foals get hungry enough to leave the fence line and wander over to a feed bucket. The dams are pretty much over the removal of their foal more quickly."

Edgar Schutte, who owns and manages Rainbow Equus Meadows in California uses a variation of the incomplete separation method. "We used to leave the mares in pastures next to the mares, but we found the foals had a tendency to want to jump back in with the mares," he recalls. Their new approach is to wean in groups of two or three—putting the mares in stalls with windows overlooking a corral, and putting the foals in the corral next to the stalls/windows. This way the foals and mares can see each other, but the foals can't nurse.

**"Breeders who wean by the astrological signs still utilize one of the methods listed...but they'll let the astrological signs determine when they will wean."**

"The foals stay quiet and don't run a lot this way, and the mares seem to worry even less than the foals," he explains. At Rainbow Equus Meadows, they also generally wait until the foals are six months old before weaning to reduce the stress on the foals and to allow for the weather to begin cooling off.

**Combined interval and incomplete separation** is another choice. These two are considered by many experts to be the least stressful methods of weaning, and combining them can reduce the stress even further. As with the interval weaning method, the biggest drawback is the additional time and work involved.

**Weaning by the astrological signs** involves the phases of the moon and the moon's correlation with the signs of the Zodiac. The moon cycles are believed to be at their calmest when they correlate to the signs of the Zodiac for the lower body, sometimes referred to as "when the blood is in the feet." These Zodiac signs are Sagittarius (thighs), Aquarius (legs), Capricorn (knees) and Pisces (feet.) Each year the Farmer's Almanac publishes the best days of each month to wean by the astrological signs, and the recommended dates for the current month are published on their website [farmersalmanac.com](http://farmersalmanac.com).

Breeders who wean by the astrological signs still utilize one of the methods listed above, but they'll let the astrological signs determine *when* they will wean.

### Early Weaning

Sometimes it isn't possible to wait until a foal is at least four months old to wean. Foals and/or mares may be injured, requiring separation, and in some sad situations mares die and nurse mares aren't available. Sometimes it may be desirable to separate the foal from the mare as soon as possible because the mare has vices or bad behaviors you don't want the foal to learn, such as cribbing or wood chewing. And sometimes the foal needs to be weaned early for the sake of the mare—if you're unable to keep weight on the mare, for example.

In these cases one of the weaning methods mentioned earlier will still be utilized, but the mare and foal should be monitored even more closely. In the case of an orphan foal, the raising process becomes infinitely more difficult (particularly in the early stages), as it is far beyond the scope of simply weaning.

### Final Thoughts

Although weaning can be stressful to horses and humans alike, the good news is that both mares and foals will usually settle into the new routine in a few days. With some of the methods outlined above there will be almost no anxiety or stress at all. Before you know it your foal will be an independent, happy weanling ready to mature and learn how to be a horse. **WT**