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A Tradition of Leadership and Excellence in Equine Medicine

Bacterial pneumonia in foals
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During the first six months of life, pneumonia is a major cause of disease and mortality in foals. This time of year foal pneumonia is of paramount importance.

One of the main considerations in evaluating foal pneumonia is the adequacy of passively acquired immunity (i.e. acquired immunoglobulins from the mare's colostrum). One of the most effective ways to determine the level of immunoglobulin absorbed by the foal is to draw blood and run an IgG test. This should be done within the first 8-24 hours of life.

Pneumonia in foals can be caused by a number of different organisms. One of the most common causative agents is Rhodococcus equi. R. equi typically affects foals at 1-4 months of age. Foals that are infected with R. equi usually show an increased respiratory rate, nasal discharge and a fever. Radiographically, abscesses can be seen in the lungs. Some foals may also have some joint swelling associated with the pneumonia. However, the joint is not usually septic. R. equi infection occurs primarily in the summer months due to the increased incidence of dust. The soil is where the organisms live. During dry, dusty periods the organism is more readily aerosolized and can easily be inhaled by the foal. Stress, and/or crowded living conditions create the perfect opportunity for infection.

Treatment of R. equi pneumonia can be a long process, taking up to 9 weeks of antibiotic therapy, due to the abscesses that form, and the drug's difficulty penetrating these abscesses. Typically, a combination of Rifampin and Doxycycline or Erythromycin are effective in combating the infection.

Prevention could save you time and money in the long run. Making sure the foal receives the proper amount of immunoglobulins, minimizing stress, minimizing overcrowding and keeping the foal in an environment that is as dust-free as possible will help decrease the incidence of R. equi pneumonia. One last preventative measure is to administer plasma to the foal that is immune specific for R. equi within the first 24-48 hours of life. All of these measures are good preventative techniques and should be discussed with your veterinarian.