

Angular limb deformities  
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Angular limb deformities are very common in all breeds of foals. These can include both an inward deviation of the joints (varus) or outward deviation of the joints (valgus). Most commonly these deviations are seen in the knee, hock and fetlock joints. The foal can have one or more joints affected, and can also vary quite widely in the severity of the condition. The causes of this condition vary, with some the manager can address, while others are due to random chance. Both premature and dismature foals very commonly have angular limb deformities due to the lack of strength in supporting structures, or the failure of complete ossification of the cuboidal bones (small bones of the knee and hock). The causative factors of these conditions may be an infection or inflammation of the placenta or uterus, twinning, and severe stress in the mare. Development of angular limb deformities post foaling is due to a difference in the growth rate across the inside and outside of the growth plate. In essence, the difference in speed in bone development causes the bone to veer to one side or the other. This can be due to a variety of factors including dietary imbalances, environmental factors, as well as genetics.

If your foal does have angular limb deformities, there are actually many therapeutic management techniques used to help straighten the limb. They range from quite simple to the complex and expensive, usually depending on the severity of the deviation. Conservative techniques involve stall rest in order to prevent uneven loading of the foal's developing legs. The foal may be bandaged or splinted, or the hoof can be trimmed or glue on extensions can be used to help straighten the limb. For example if the foal has a valgus deformity in its knee (the lower leg will sweep outwards), the outside hoof wall is lowered, or a glue on extension is placed on the inside of the hoof. Often dramatic improvements are seen with these simple techniques. If the limb deviation is more severe, and budgets allow, corrective surgery may be required. These include periosteal stripping, or placing screws, staples or wires across the growth plate. The goal of periosteal stripping (removing a section of the periosteum, or membrane covering the bone) is to accelerate growth of the side of the bone growing too slowly. Typically this procedure is done in young foals. Alternatively, transphyseal bridging is used to slow down the rate of growth on the side of the bone with too fast a growth rate. However, consult with your veterinarian to decide which management technique is the correct one for your foal. Mismanagement can exacerbate the problem, and it is also possible to overcorrect the foal, and end up with a deviation in the opposite direction!

*Want to know the difference between premature and dismature?*

*Premature foals are those born before 320 days of age, while dismature foals may be of a normal gestational age but are weak, small and appear unready to have been born. These foals are typically thin, are slow to stand, have poor suckle reflex, can chill rapidly and are marked by fine silky hair coats and soft ears and lips. These foals will require a high level of assistance in their care, but with proper supportive care and a lot of time and effort, can continue on to lead normal lives.*