

Problems at calving
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The goal for cow-calf producers is being able to sell a weaned calf. The major obstacles to that goal are reproductive losses and calves that were lost at or near birth. This article will discuss several common problems that affect cows from late pregnancy through calving. Most of these problems can be prevented or reduced with good management. Many problems that occur during calving have a rapid onset and require a rapid response.

Problems Pre-calving

Vaginal/Rectal Prolapse

Causes - The tissue around the birth canal becomes relaxed as the cow starts the last third of gestation and there is increased abdominal pressure as the size of the calf increases. This may be enough pressure to push the vagina or the rectum out. If the tissue is trapped outside the vagina, it will swell and may become trapped. In some cases the bladder is also involved and the animal is unable to urinate. This condition is more common in older cows but may occur in first-calf heifers. There is a genetic link and cattle that have this problem are more likely to have the problem in subsequent years. Also heifers from cows that have this problem are more likely to have pre-calving prolapses than other cattle.

Treatment – This may become an emergency if the bladder is involved and should be attended to by a veterinarian. Several procedures are available to treat these cows, after replacement a suture may be required to hold the prolapse in or a prolapse button may be inserted. The advantage of the prolapse button is the cow can deliver the calf without removing it. If a suture is used, the suture must be removed before the calf can be delivered.

Prevention - Remove animals from the herd once they develop this condition. Don't keep animals that have pre-calving prolapses or heifers from cows that had this condition.

Problems at Calving

Dystocia

Any time a cow is unable to deliver her calf normally, a dystocia has occurred. Many management practices can be used to prevent the incidence of dystocia. Many of these practices start with heifer development and nutrition.

Breeding Management – The majority of calving problems occur in first calf heifers. Measure pelvic size and cull heifers with small pelvic areas before breeding starts. This is one of the best methods to reduce calving problems. Select bulls to use on heifers based on the birth weight EPD of the bull. Expose heifers to the bull so they will start calving 30 to 45 days before the adult cows. Keep heifers in good body condition (beef body condition score of 6).

Calving Management - Develop calf flow through your farm.

Keep first-calf heifers separate from the cows. This reduces competition for food and exposure to bacteria that may cause calf scours. Heifers with their first calf should not be put in with adult cows until breeding season. A separate calving area should be established that is different than the pre-calving area. Cows should be placed in the calving area just before they are ready to calve and removed from the calving area as soon as they bond with the calf. This generally takes 24 to 36 hours. The post-calving

area should be large enough to prevent manure build-up. This will prevent the build up of bacteria and viruses that may cause scours. Remember, calves consuming manure cause all calf scour problems. If you can reduce the amount of manure in the calf's environment you can prevent most scour problems. Provide surveillance and calving assistance on a 24-hour basis if possible. Restricting the breeding season to 42 to 60 days will allow personnel to focus their attention to assist in calving for a short, but intense, period. Night feeding (between 9 and 11 p.m.) will cause more animals to start calving during daylight hours.

General Indications for Calving Assistance – the animal laying down and starting abdominal contractions indicates the start of normal calving. The water bag (part of the placenta) appears in the birth canal. The water bag will normally break after 30 to 60 minutes of labor. This is often followed by a period of restlessness and several position changes. Abdominal contractions become more forceful and the feet appear in the birth canal. Birth is usually completed after 30 to 60 minutes of hard labor. As a general rule, if the animal has not made any progress after 60 to 90 minutes, assistance should be given. The appearance of the head alone, the head and one leg, one leg alone, or the tail are all indications of an abnormal calf presentation and indicate the need for assistance.

Guidelines for Calving Assistance – Comfortably restrain the cow with a halter. Squeeze chutes and head gates can be difficult if the cow goes down and a rope around the neck can cause real problems. The best situation is to have a small pen with a head catch. After the animal's head is in the catch, a halter is applied and tied to the head gate, the head is released from the head gate enough to allow the cow to lay down. I would generally leave the head caught until I had the calf positioned and the calf chains on then release the head. Tie the cow's head in a corner to reduce the amount of movement. It is easy to put too much pressure on if you use a calf jack. The basic guidelines are to be clean and gentle. Keep the area around the birth canal as clean as possible, keep your hands and arms as clean as possible, and use lots of lubricant. The calf can only come out one of two ways—both front feet and the head, or both back feet out together. If you do not feel the two front feet and the head or the two back feet and the tail – Don't Pull. If you are unable to correct the position of the calf to one of the above presentations, call your veterinarian. The three most common problems are, not getting the head to come out with the front feet (head turning back); having a calf that is too big to be delivered through the birth canal, resulting in hip lock and an abnormal breach presentation in which the tail is the only part of the calf visible at the vulva. The presence of any of these problems usually requires veterinary assistance. After delivering the calf, always make sure that there is not a twin present.

Uterine Prolapses

This is the expulsion of the uterus through the vulva to the outside of the body. This condition is seen more often in older animals and occurs soon after calving.

Causes - Difficult birth with injury or irritation of the external birth canal and severe straining, retained placenta, and loose uterine attachment in the abdominal cavity. There may also be poor uterine tone post-calving. Poor body condition with malnutrition may be observed.

Treatment - An emergency condition rapid treatment is important. Your veterinarian should be called immediately. Keep the prolapsed uterus clean and moist.

After Effects - No permanent problem if the uterus is quickly replaced. Producers don't need to automatically cull a cow because of a prolapsed uterus, but a severe injury such as drying or severe laceration may cause infertility.

Obturator Paralysis/Downer Cow

Cattle that have had a difficult delivery will have a variable amount of swelling and tissue trauma around the birth canal. This swelling and bruising may damage the nerves from the spinal cord or those in the hip that supply the legs, preventing normal leg function. In some cases, excessive traction while pulling a calf will fracture the middle lower bones of the pelvis.

Causes - Excessive pulling to deliver a calf or having the calf in the birth canal too long (several hours) may cause nerve damage. Some cows may deliver normally, but because of poor footing will slip and "split out." Damage, in this case to the pelvis, produces a downer cow.

Treatment - Steroids may be used to reduce swelling and assist in nerve healing. Cows that can stand should be placed in a clean dry pen.

Retained Placenta

Usually the placenta is passed in 3 to 8 hours after calving. If it has not passed by 8 to 12 hours, the placenta is retained, and the animal should be watched carefully.

Causes - Dystocia, malnutrition, feed deficiencies, twinning, or abortion will all increase the chance of a retained placenta. Some infectious diseases such as IBR, Brucellosis, Listeriosis, and Leptospirosis will cause abortion and retained placentas.

Treatment - Studies show that letting the cow clean by herself will result in better fertility than manual removal of the placenta. Watch these cows closely and if they appear depressed or go off feed they may need further care. The use of pills or antibiotics in the uterus has been shown to reduce fertility. Prostaglandins may aid in getting the uterus to reduce in size and in releasing the placenta.

Grass Tetany

Similar to milk fever in that cattle in heavy post-calving lactation are losing large amounts of magnesium (Mg) in their milk. This condition may also be seen just before calving. Most types of mixed pasture grasses are low in Mg.

Clinical Signs - In the early stages, most affected cattle will appear restless, stop grazing, and have increased activity with an unusual high stepping gait. As the condition progresses, the animal falls down, the legs are stiff, and convulsions occur. The eyes move in an erratic manner and may roll in the head. The heart rate and body temperature are elevated. Some animals may become very aggressive and attempt to charge or butt using their heads.

Treatment - IV Mg is usually given with calcium.

Prevention - Provide supplemental Mg in mineral mix.