

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Navel and Joint Ill

An important health concern in young calves is navel ill which can lead to joint ill.

Navel ill occurs shortly after birth when bacteria from the environment or skin are able to enter the calf through the navel and cause an infection or abscess in the umbilical (navel) area. If the infection gets into the blood stream and spreads throughout the body, joints in the legs are likely to become infected and the problem becomes “joint ill.”

The bacteria that cause navel ill are very common but are only likely to cause problems if the calf is born in a dirty environment or does not get enough colostrum. Prevention of this problem focuses on calving in as clean an environment as possible and minimizing the risk of calving difficulty (particularly in heifers).

First thing's first

For a calf to consume adequate amounts of colostrum, it must be able to stand, find the dam's teats and suckle within six hours of birth, and then suckle several times in the next 12 hours.

In addition, the dam must stand, have a good maternal bond with the calf, and have teats that can be grasped by the calf. Calves born unassisted stand more quickly, are more likely to bond with their dam, and have greater consumption of colostrum, compared to calves that required assistance during birth.

Proper heifer development and nutrition, use of high calving-ease expected progeny difference (EPD) bulls on heifers, and appropriate cow nutrition are good strategies to decrease the risk of calving difficulty.

Despite the importance of adequate antibody passage, colostrum intake is not the only factor that determines whether calves develop navel or joint ill. The other important factor determining the number of sick calves and the severity of disease is the amount of exposure to disease-causing germs.

Location, location, location

The ideal location for calving is on well-drained pastures. If heifers or cows need to be moved to a drylot to deal with calving difficulty, extra attention should be given to improve sanitation and to treat the navel of newborn calves with iodine.

Dipping the navel of newborn calves in a strong tincture of iodine can be helpful if the calf is born in a dry-lot or other unsanitary area or if the calf was born assisted. If calves are born on well-drained pastures and experiencing very little calving difficulty, dipping their navels is actually not very important.

Signs of navel or joint ill can occur as early as two days of age. If only the navel is involved, it will

usually appear enlarged and wet. If the infection has moved into the blood stream, the calf may appear depressed, have lameness or swollen joints, cloudy eyes, a poor appetite or diarrhea, or have a fever.

Treatment

Treatment of calves with joint ill can be successful if the infection is limited to the navel. However, if joints become infected as well, even aggressive treatment may not be successful and it is usually costly. If the calf is severely affected, less than aggressive treatment is not likely to be successful.

Obviously, prevention by decreasing calving difficulty and improving sanitation is preferable to death, production loss, or high treatment cost for affected calves. **AJ**

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