

Caring for the Newborn Calf

by Heather Smith Thomas

You've anxiously waited nine months for your cows to give birth. You've fed and cared for them, hoping to give their calves a good start.

It can all be for nothing, however, if you aren't there when calving time comes. What happens to the calf during birth and immediately afterward can make all the difference in whether or not it will be healthy, strong and vigorous — or stressed, weak and susceptible to disease.

Being there for every birth can save calves that otherwise wouldn't survive or might end up injured. The importance of a normal, problem-free birth cannot be overestimated.

If a calf is presented wrong or is too large for a first-calf heifer, your assistance in correcting the problem can reduce the stress and trauma to the cow and calf and help ensure that the calf will be born alive and strong.

If a calf is born weak, injured or exhausted from a difficult birth, it may not be able to get up and nurse. If cold or wet weather is a factor, it could mean double trouble. Once the calf's mouth gets cold, it may not be able to nurse even if it does get up.

If the calf is in a drafty or damp barn with wet bedding, it may not be any better off than outside. Keep calves reasonably warm and comfortable by providing fresh, dry, clean bedding. A clean cow with a clean udder is just as important.

A calf tired or injured from a difficult birth is also more susceptible to pneumonia. Fluid in its air passages can settle into the lungs. A calf can become very sick within a few hours, with cough and fever. It may take several days of intensive care and antibiotic treatment to save it.

Problems are easily compounded with a vulnerable newborn calf. The strong, lively calf that is born quickly and easily can usually get right up and nurse, in spite of cold weather.

It's important that the calf be up and nursing soon after birth, preferably within one hour. Colostrum in a cow's milk gives the calf antibodies against disease. Unlike a human baby that picks up immunities from the mother while still in the womb, the calf comes into the world completely vulnerable to disease. It has to get its immunities through colostrum. This temporary immunity usually lasts several weeks— until its own immune system matures enough to make its own antibodies.

During the cow's life she comes into contact with a number of disease organisms, developing antibodies against them. She also develops immunities from annual vaccinations. If vaccinations are up to date, the cow will pass some of those antibodies to her calf.

Cows raised on your farm or ranch will have more antibodies against local disease organisms than will a cow brought in

from outside your area. This is an important point to remember if you borrow colostrum from a neighbor or a dairy; it may not contain the antibodies your calf needs. The best protection comes from colostrum produced by a cow in your herd.

If for some reason, you have to use colostrum from a cow other than the calf's mother, choose a middle-age cow from your cowherd. A first-calf heifer or an old cow may not produce high-quality colostrum with the high antibody content that a cow in her prime will produce.

Timing is crucial. **The** newborn calf's intestinal lining can only absorb the large antibodies from colostrum for a few hours. After that, the lining thickens and antibodies can no longer pass through it into the bloodstream. The optimum time for absorption is the first two hours following birth.

Recent studies show that by the time the calf is four hours old, he has lost 75 percent of his ability to absorb colostrum antibodies. Many cases of "weak calf syndrome" are actually just a combination of cold weather stress and immune failure — because the calf wasn't able to nurse quickly enough.

On our ranch, if a calf isn't up and nursing within an hour, we help it. We make sure it gets on a teat and gets a good amount of milk from all four quarters.

Colostrum is a high-calorie meal, laced with rich, creamy fat, that gives a calf energy and strength and helps keep it warm. Colostrum also serves as a laxative and gut stimulant to help the calf pass its first bowel movements.

Difficult births can cause injury and damage to the head of the calf. Swelling of the head and tongue can make it difficult or impossible for calves to breathe or nurse. To assist the calf in breathing, take the membrane sac off and clear its nasal passages of fluid.

If a calf has a swollen tongue and has trouble nursing, or if it is weak, we feed it colostrum with a bottle. If it can't suck we give it via stomach tube. An esophageal feeder also works well.

The backward presentation calf can be a real challenge to get started. You may need to hang it up briefly by the hind legs to let fluid drain out of its nasal passages. Then stimulate the calf to cough or sneeze by sticking a clean piece of hay or straw up one nostril. This helps it start breathing.

Every herd has its own unique problems that must be dealt with and overcome. Some producers find pre-calving scours vaccination very helpful. Some producers have to employ further protection, while others have never experienced a problem or needed protection. Consult your veterinarian for a good health and vaccination program to fit your needs.

