

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Assisting Cows at Calving

Prepare for this spring's new calves.

Calving season is a time for long hours and the possibility for difficult births. Factors contributing to calving problems are most commonly the size of the calf relative to the size of the dam and the position of the calf in the birth canal.

Because the length of labor can vary, I usually recommend producers check a cow if no progress is seen in a 30-minute time span once the feet or water bag are visible. To appropriately examine a cow, she should be restrained with a head catch or halter. While perfect cleanliness cannot be expected, it is important to keep your arms and equipment as clean as possible. If no problem can be identified, then the cow should be allowed to continue unassisted for another 30 minutes.

Examination of a calving cow should be made with specific questions or goals in mind. These include:

Is the vagina relaxed, and the cervix dilated?

When the feet first appear, the cervix may not be fully dilated, and the vagina and vulva have not had a chance to relax to their full extent. While wearing a plastic sleeve and using lots of lubrication, insert a hand with the palm flat against the vaginal

wall and slowly slide forward. If a band or ridge is definitely felt, the cow is not fully dilated. Excessive pulling at this point may cause a torn cervix or vagina.

Is the calf in the normal position?


The normal position is head-first, both front legs extended with the head lying between and resting on them. This position is determined by noting three things: 1.) identify the head, 2.) the hooves face down, and 3.) the first two joints of the legs (the fetlock and the knee) bend in the same direction. In many situations, an abnormally positioned calf will require the assistance of a veterinarian or an experienced herdsman to position the calf correctly prior to delivery. If calf position cannot be corrected, the veterinarian may have to perform a C-section.

Can the calf pass through the pelvic canal?

A large calf relative to the size of the pelvis is more commonly a problem for heifers than for mature cows. Mature cows that are carrying an embryo transfer (ET) or cloned calf can also have

a calf that is too large for her birth canal. If the calf is too large to be pulled up into the birth canal far enough for both fetlocks to extend a hand's width outside the vulva, a veterinarian or an experienced herdsman should be called in to continue the delivery and to consider if a C-section is needed.

C-section of heifers and cows can be a successful surgery for both the calf and the dam if done early. If the calf is already dead and the heifer is exhausted before a C-section is attempted, the likelihood for a productive cow in the future is reduced.

Becoming comfortable examining cows at calving helps you to determine if the calf is in the proper position and able to pass through the birth canal without expert assistance. In addition, working closely with your veterinarian so you can receive advice and assistance when needed is important to provide the best care for your herd. 

EDITOR'S NOTE: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan.

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