

## Spring Snow, Cold, Damp Weather Can Create Problems for New Calves

An early spring snowstorm and the cool, damp conditions that follow are tough on newborn calves. Beef producers and veterinarians deal with more sick calves as a result.

Bill Epperson, Extension veterinarian at South Dakota State University, says these conditions produce stress and lower disease resistance of calves and are associated with increased calfhoo disease, including diarrhea, navel infections and respiratory tract infections.

"We can't control the weather, but we can modulate its effect on the young calf," says Epperson, offering insight into and ways of coping with the problem.

Calves spend their early lives either nursing or lying down resting. In cold, snowy conditions, calves may require the protection offered by calf shelters.

"These areas need to be kept dry and clean of manure or mud buildup," says Epperson. "A calf resting on a wet surface will require more energy for maintenance. A dry surface for the calf to lie on has been associated with lower stress and improved weight gain."

While calf shelters provide a good windbreak for calves, they are also a congregation spot where manure accumulates. "Moving shelters or moving animals to a clean area on a weekly basis can help minimize the buildup of diarrhea-producing microbes," Epperson says.

Respiratory disease may occur when calves congregate. A calf incubating respiratory disease may effectively spread the organism by close contact.

Navel infections usually are the result of contact of the young calf's wet umbilical cord with contaminated ground. "Attention to the calving environment and a program of dipping navels in iodine can help reduce the number of navel infections," says Epperson.

When navel infections are epidemic, proper use of antibiotics also may play a role, mainly in helping to limit infection to the navel area and keeping infection from spreading to internal organs.

Adverse weather may alter nursing patterns and change feed intake in cows. Such changes may predispose the calf to more digestive upsets and may increase the risk of overeating disease.

"If you're in an area where overeating disease has been a problem in young calves, remain committed to your preventive program of vaccination and antitoxin administration," advises Epperson. "Your local veterinarian can address those concerns specific to your farm or area."

Epperson lists several other management tactics when adverse conditions occur in calving season:

- **Monitor calves closely** Early treatment of scours and respiratory disease is usually preferable to a "wait and see" stance. Stress conditions make it less likely that the calf will quickly recover on its own.
- **Relapses following treatment** are more common under weather stress persisting for several days or

more. Continue treatments for prescribed length of time, even if the calf appears normal after only one or two treatments.

- **Remove sick calves** with their dams to a quarantine area. Keep the pairs in this area until calving season ends and all calves are at least three weeks old. This helps limit contamination of the nursing grounds with the pathogenic organisms.
- **Control group size.** If possible, limit groups to 50 or less cow-calf pairs. The larger the group, the more like disease will spread.
- **Watch for coccidiosis.** Young calves confined in area contaminated with manure may ingest a large dose of coccidia. Signs of diarrhea (often with blood) may appear as soon as 14 days after exposure. Coccidiosis is commonly seen in 4- to 6-week-old calves. If possible, avoid prolonged confinement, manage the wet areas in and around shelters and feeders, and treat and isolate calves promptly. Consult with your herd veterinarian you see suspect cases, since treatment of all the calves may be indicated.
- **Avoid bringing in new foster calves.** If you do, isolate the cow and new calf from the rest of the herd.
- **Diagnose disease problems,** especially if you are having more cases than usual or cases that do not respond to treatment. Disease diagnosis provides that foundation for logical preventive programs.
- **Keep careful records.** They will be useful in review; the health program and formulating future goals.

— South Dakota State University  
Department of Ag Communications

