

## 40 Tips for Easier Calving

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Nothing beats experience in making calvings easier. The following snippets of practical wisdom may help that experience come more cheaply than losing a calf or even a cow.

### 1. Preparation

- a. Bigger calves relative to the dam are more likely to cause problems so think of factors affecting this – sire breed, nutrition, expected calf-weight and duration of pregnancy.
- b. Genetics - sire selection of both the calf and sire of the dam are important – look at relevant EBVs where a higher number indicates easier calving (Calving Ease Direct, Calving Ease Daughters) and Birthweight.
- c. Decide the best way to provide supplementary feed (if needed) in late pregnancy.
- d. Do not have beef cattle at Body Score less than 2.5 for winter calving (2 for spring calving) to ensure healthy colostrum production and good return to breeding.
- e. Good feeding can lead to problems (e.g. 2021 grazing) with pads of pelvic fat and weaker muscles with more intramuscular fat (marbling).
- f. Prepare calving paddock with shelter for cow and calf from inclement weather.
- g. Decide on your philosophy of assisting difficult calvings and keeping cow and calf afterwards.

### 2. Last month of Pregnancy

- a. Provide cattle with a mix of equal parts of common salt (sodium chloride = NaCl), aglime (calcium carbonate = CaCO<sub>3</sub>) and causmag (magnesium oxide = MgO ) to ensure there are adequate blood levels for good muscle contraction at birth.
- b. Prepare a **calving kit** to have all you might need ready and functional (see separate checklist).
- c. If you use a calf-catcher attached to your side-by-side (e.g. studs) give it a service and get your cows used to it (usually only needs a few days) before calving starts.
- d. If you have bought PTIC cows, remember there may have been a delay in selling after testing so they may calve up to a month earlier than expected.

### 3. Last week of Pregnancy

- a. Move animals to a convenient paddock close to home and / or yards, esp. heifers
- b. Check animals at least once a day for signs of calving – bagging up, raised tail-head, slackening vulva.
- c. Ensure adequate energy in the ration for muscle activity or else natural births will need assistance.

### 4. Calving

- a. You have about 4 hours from when calving starts to when the placenta begins to separate and calf begins to die – don't waste time once she is straining because you probably don't know how long she has been straining for.
- b. Clean and lubricate your arms then feel what is happening with the calf – arm-length gloves can be used to help protect you from infection but are generally inadequate and can be a hindrance.
- c. Make certain what is presented – front- or back-end, legs or tail? Is cervix dilated? Are the legs in correct positioning and are they from the same end of the same calf?
- d. Where all is normal, give a cow adequate time to calve by herself but a maximum of half an hour straining without a calf strongly suggests assistance is needed, certainly wait no longer than an hour.

- e. Attach calving ropes or straps above fetlocks (chains can be too damaging) and a third one behind the calf's ears (at the back of head) and the loop between the jaws to prevent strangulation (this keeps head aligned properly). (**Note:** Use different coloured ropes to give clear instructions to helpers.)



Fig 1 Calving ropes on calf legs – double-wrap

- f. The birth canal through a cow's pelvis is the oval shape of a rugby ball with narrower distance between the hips; broadest dimensions of calf are at its hips and the depth of its chest so easiest to calve by twisting the calf after its chest is out to prevent a 'hip-lock'.
- g. The best direction for pulling a calf is angled away from the spine (down towards the ground when standing, not parallel to it). Effective traction is best achieved when the cow is lying down (normal for cows).
- h. If you need to push part of a calf back inside to create room for manipulation (head or leg), make certain it is attached to a rope before it disappears from sight.
- i. Make certain that birth canal is always well-lubricated, esp. with dead calves that are drying out.
- j. Always pull calf when cow is straining; rest when she rests – give a rest in pulling from time to time. Allow cow's cervix and vagina to relax during calving – DO NOT RUSH the calving process.
- k. Traction can be given by people, calf-puller, wire, strainer, block and tackle or other methods.

## 5. Assisting the newborn calf

- a. Clean mouth and nostrils of any mucus or placenta but if a calf is reluctant to breathe, poke a length of dried grass or straw up its nostrils and/ rub chest with rough straw/hay to mimic cow's tongue; the sign of a survivor is that it shakes its head and ears.
- b. More drastic measure is to hang the calf over a gate or rail - hind legs one side, rest of body the other – so liquid in lungs and throats runs out. Use combinations of the above methods and/or a bucket of cold water thrown over calf to stimulate breathing.
- c. Dress calf's navel with iodine solution to prevent bacterial entry leading to navel ill, etc.

## 6. Afterbirth

- a. Release of afterbirth is the last stage of calving. Most cows cleanse normally and most vets do not get worried by a cow's afterbirth still hanging at 72 hours unless the cow is sick. Seek veterinary advice if retained cleansing becomes a common issue.

## 7. After calving

- a. Place calf near cow's head as soon as possible and walk away to allow cow-calf bonding.
- b. Encourage heifers to clean calf by rubbing new calf with milk-powder or concentrates (salt rarely works if you have been providing salt before calving).
- c. After an uncomplicated calving, antibiotic injection or pessaries into the uterus are not needed.
- d. Clean-up and dispose of afterbirth hygienically (burn in farm incinerator); cleanse race / yard (lime and fresh bedding in specialist enterprises) and disinfect equipment. DO NOT ALLOW levels of infection to rise or later-born calves will have increased risk of infectious disease.
- e. Make certain all calves get colostrum within four hours of birth (See '[Young Calf - Tips and Tricks](#)').

## 8. Complications

- a. **Prolapse of vagina and/or cervix in late pregnancy** – call your vet.
- b. **Cow not straining to calve** - may be mineral deficiency; check calf presentation is normal, if so give sub-cutaneous four-in-one flexipac injection with calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and dextrose
- c. **Cow straining but no calf** –
  - i. cervix not open – urgent vet attention
  - ii. poor presentation – assist calving or call a vet while the calf and cow are alive
- d. **Twisted calf legs** – cover calf hooves with your hand while repositioning to avoid uterus rupture.
- e. **Tight vagina and/or vulva** may need veterinary attention (e.g. episiotomy) to reduce risk of ruptured artery and the cow bleeding to death.
- f. **Cow can't get up after calving** – best to call vet sooner rather than later and discuss if a problem arises; leave it too long and it becomes an expensive emergency call or the cow never gets up because its own weights numbs the lower legs Roll downer cows every few hours
  - i. Milk fever – treat as with lack of straining – response is indicated by beads of moisture breaking out over muzzle after a few minutes.
  - ii. Nerve damage in pelvis – can happen even with unassisted births.
- g. **Uterine prolapse after calving**– emergency vet call.
- h. **Newborn calf found collapsed** – bring-in to warm up with mother (See '**Young Calf - Tips and Tricks**').

## Basic Calving Kit

The items in this list are recommended to help make calving easier and safer. If you may use other items -collect them together before calving season starts.

Calving Kit	
Equipment	Notes
3 calving ropes or straps (Keep spares in stock)	Better than chains which can cause damage Have different colours Disinfect and clean off placenta after use and store dry
Robust bucket with a handle	Can be used to carry kit
Container of clean water	Use with soap or disinfectant in the bucket to cleanse your arms and cow's backside
Soap / obstetrical lubricant	Use frequently if pulling a calf, especially if calf is dead
Disinfectant (e.g. hibitane)	To disinfect equipment
Obstetrical gloves	Arm-length gloves may reduce risk of zoonosis infection, e.g. leptospirosis, but are likely to be ineffective and may cause problems.
Source of pulling power	Calf-puller, block and tackle, people, wire-strainer May need short wooden rods for pulling on calving ropes
Towel	To use after cleaning-up post-calving.
Calving First Aid Kit	
Spray bottle of iodine antiseptic	Dress calf-navel
4-in-1 flexipac (keep several in stock)	Calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and dextrose solution with delivery tubing and needle. Carry to calving in a warm water bath (e.g. lidded container)