

12 Tips for Calving Season:

I always look forward to calving season. I always smile when I see those new little calves bucking and bellowing in the fresh bedding, while momma follows with concern. In some ways there isn't a real "calving season" for us in our practice. We attend bovine obstetrics for upwards of 7 months now because many producers have moved to later calving. So, some of you may be almost done now, and others have a while to wait until the fun begins. I decided to put together a list of calving tips that may help producers have a more successful season, whenever that may be.

1. **Feed Your Cows at Night-** Research has shown that by feeding the cows once a day after dark will result in 77% of cows calving during the daytime.
2. **Take Note on Physiological Changes-** Mammary and vulvar swelling become apparent in the last two or three weeks of gestation due to rising estrogen levels as she prepares to give birth. 6 hours before birth you will notice the tail head sitting higher as her pelvic ligaments relax, this coincides with cervical relaxation and the onset of contractions. The water bag will appear 2 hours before birth, in the last 30 minutes she will lay down as the contraction pace increases.
3. **Know When to Intervene-** As a general rule; if the water bag has been out for 2 hours it's time to give her some help. Other reasons to help: hard contractions for 45 minutes with no progression, only one leg coming out or if you notice an abnormal smell.
4. **Have a Restraint Plan-** Most producers have a maternity pen which is very important for patient safety, human safety, and a successful outcome. It is easiest to correct a mal presentation when the cow is standing, and better to pull when cow or heifer is lying on their side. Gravity is on your side when she is standing, as laying down abdominal weight and position allows the cow to strain and contract more effectively.
5. **Be Clean as Possible-** Always use calving gloves. Cleanse her perineum well with soap and wash away any contaminations and manure. This is very important for the cow especially if a caesarian section is needed later to decrease abdominal spill and infection. OB lubricant is very important to make the job easier, however only use if you feel a caesarian section is not needed. Again, abdominal spillage of lubricant during the surgery may result in infection.
6. **Evaluate Calf Viability-** In checking a cow, the first thought is to determine if the calf is alive, as this may make a difference in your strategy. When you reach in to find the calf, a live calf generally will jerk its foot when you handle its legs or pinch the skin between its toes. You can also stick a finger in its mouth; a live calf will suck or gag. On a backward calf, stick a finger in its anus to check muscle tone. You will find if anal sphincter is completely flaccid, he's dead. If there's some muscle tone, he's still alive.
7. **Mal presentations are fixed by "Repulsion"-** Repulsion is the act of pushing the calf forward out of the pelvis to give you more room to correct the mal presentation. Example, if there is one leg back it is helpful to push the entire calf back in to give you room to reposition the foot. Backwards calves you have to push the calf back in and bring one leg up at a time. Always put a hand over the hoof to prevent it from tearing the uterus. Patience is needed to work with the cow and her contractions.

8. **How hard can we pull?** - Always double loop the chain on each foot. The rule is 275 pounds of pull, roughly equal to what a man can pull with all his might. If you can get both shoulders and the head engaged in the pelvic canal, this is true when both knees are out of the vulva, then it is safe to use the calf puller or two strong people. Otherwise you risk injury to both calf and mom.
9. **How to Pull** – When pulling a calf, always pull when the cow is straining; rest when she rests. Remember most of the time it is not a race. Don't put steady traction on the calf without periodic letup. It takes time for the cervix to dilate and the birth canal to stretch to its fullest capacity. Pull normal presentations (forward swan dive) in a slightly downward fashion. Backwards calves pull more straight out as you can fracture femurs by pulling down. If you get hip locked try a quarter twist of the calf to allow the calves' pelvis to go through at an angle where there is more room. If you use a head snare or loops remember it's used to direct the head, not to pull the calf. If you cannot get both feet and the head coming, or it is not safe to pull using the 275 rule it's time to call the veterinarian.
10. **Get the Calf Breathing-** Once the calf is out and on the ground rub the chest vigorously to stimulate breathing, stick your fingers in his mouth and pull out any mucous, if this doesn't work try sticking a piece of straw up their nose. Place the calf in the "frog" position or in sternal. This will help oxygenate both lungs if the calf is having difficulty. Holding the calf upside down does not clear mucous and has been shown to actually hinder breathing. A calf hung upside has the entire weight of its abdominal organs on its diaphragm, and all the clear slimy fluid that rushes out is actually amniotic fluid from its stomach, not from its lungs.



11. **Watch the Cow after Intervention-** immediately after birth watch the female doesn't give another push and prolapse her uterus. I like to get the cow up soon after delivery to let gravity put calf bed back where it belongs.
12. **The Calf is Born Devoid of Antibodies-** Colostral management is the most important aftercare in calf survival. They need 3-5 L of good quality colostrum in the first 9-12 hours of life. Colostrum

from mom is the best source followed by colostrum from another cow on your place followed by freeze dried commercial preparations. Getting colostrum from other farms risks bringing diseases like Johnes or scours on to the farm. If completely replacing colostrum with a commercial product ensures that they get 120 grams of IgG (immunoglobulin) in the first 6 hours.

At the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic we have a veterinarian on call 24 hours a day for calving or any other animal emergency you might have. We are equipped for assisting with calvings on farm or in our heated drive through facility.

Have a Happy Calving Season!!

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