

Section 7

Calving and the Newborn Calf

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Introduction

Calving is a high-risk event for both the cow and the calf. Common problems encountered include difficult, abnormal or slow calvings. The newborn calf is challenged by numerous infections which can result in navel ill, scour and pneumonia.

- ① How can I minimise the likelihood of calving problems?
- ② How can I best care for the new-born calf?

Calving and the Newborn Calf

1 How can I minimise the likelihood of calving problems?

How to

Prevent problems before calving

- Make sure your heifers are big enough at calving (see chapter on replacement heifers).
- Choose an easy calving sire, particularly for heifers.
- Make sure your cows and heifers are not too fat or too thin at calving.
- Feed them a balanced diet during pregnancy including trace minerals and vitamins. If you are unsure about the trace element status of your herd, ask your vet to bleed five cows and five heifers in late pregnancy.
- Control calving date. If calves are overdue, discuss the options with your local vet.
- Control infections in the pregnant animal by vaccinating or eradicating diseases.

How to

Manage calvings to reduce problems

- Ideally move pregnant animals to a calving unit before they start to calve – this will generally ensure a more hygienic environment and help prevent losses due to early scours and navel/joint ill.
- Supervise but don't necessarily intervene during calving. Intervene if calving is not progressing normally; if two hours after the waterbag or fetal hooves appear the calf is not born, examine the birth canal and calf with a gloved hand.
- To avoid injuries to the calf, call the vet early if you're not sure you can get the calf out alive. Be careful not to pull the jack downwards too acutely before the chest comes out when assisting the calf at birth, as this can cause fractured ribs.

2 How can I best care for the new-born calf?

How to

Care for the newborn calf

- Most calves do not need help but some do – particularly those presenting in abnormal positions or after a prolonged calving.

- Be present at calving to resuscitate a weak calf, dress its navel and ensure it receives colostrum.
- Resuscitate weak calves by suspending the calf upside down (max one minute), pour water over its head and sit the calf upright. Use resuscitating drops/gels or other resuscitating aids if available.
- Navel ill is a problem where the calf's immunity and the calving environment hygiene are poor. To prevent this condition, ensure calves get adequate colostrum, dress the navel cord as appropriate, and keep the calving bedding clean.

See chapter Managing Colostrum

- Calves should suckle the cow until they are full as soon as possible after birth.
- In situations where this is not feasible, research at Teagasc, Grange has shown that feeding the calf 5% of its birth weight (e.g. ~2 litres of colostrum for a 40 kg calf), within one hour or so of birth, with subsequent suckling of the dam (or a second feed) 6 to 8 hours later, ensures adequate passive immunity.



In young calves there is a high risk of diseases such as scour and pneumonia. See chapter on calf diseases.

Animal Health Ireland has produced a series of leaflets on calving management and calf health available at www.animalhealthireland.ie.