

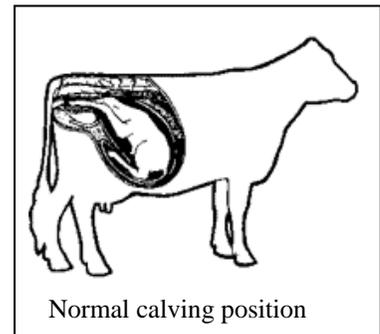
Are You Ready for Calving?

Carla L. Huston, DVM, PhD, ACVPM
Beef Extension and Outreach Coordinator
College of Veterinary Medicine, Mississippi State University
Submitted to: Cattle Business Magazine, November 2013

The seasons are changing again in the southeast. Winter grazing is on many producers' minds, and most of us have already started feeding hay. Maintaining good nutrition in the cowherd is imperative for the health of both the dam and her new calf. As we prepare our winter nutritional program, now is also the time to start thinking about the upcoming calving season. Is your "Calving Kit" ready for that first calf that hits the ground? Being ready for potential complications will help us prevent losses from dystocia, and help ensure a healthy calf and dam.

Our goals for calving season are focused on delivering a viable, healthy calf and preventing injury to the dam. Dystocia, or calving difficulty, is one of the leading causes of death of neonatal calves. Approximately half of all calf deaths at or soon after birth can be attributed to dystocia. An average of 4% of females will require some type of assistance at calving, with first-calf heifers more likely to have difficulty. It has been estimated that dystocia causes the beef and dairy industries over \$400 million annually.

Before we are able to know when to assist in parturition, or calving, we first should have an understanding of what's normal. Normal calving has three stages. During the *first stage*, or the "preparation stage," the cow's cervix is dilating, her contractions begin, and the calf rotates into the proper position (upright with nose and forelegs pointing towards birth canal). It's during this time when we often observe the cow off to herself. Her vulva may appear swollen and relaxed, and her tail slightly lifted up. This stage can last for more than a day and ends when the water bag ruptures. The second *stage*, or the "delivery stage" starts with increasing contractions, the cow appears to be straining more and will often be lying down. The fetus enters the birth canal, and the calf is delivered. The *third stage* of delivery is the "cleaning stage," where the membrane attachments relax and fetal membranes are expelled.



Knowing when to assist or when to call for veterinary assistance can be difficult to predict. Assisting too early as well as too late can cause problems in parturition. There's an old saying that nature picks the day, but the cow picks the time to calve. Try to avoid moving cows once they start the calving process. A cow can stay in the first stage of labor for extended times, especially if she is disturbed. Calving times can vary by many factors, including age and individual animal characteristics. The key is to watch the delivery process for *progress*. General guidelines for providing assistance or calling your veterinarian have been provided (see sidebar).

If you encounter an animal that may need assistance, bring her to an area where she can be safely caught and examined. Be sure this area has good footing, and try to avoid

sawdust and newspaper bedding. If you have to snug her up behind a gate or panel, it's a good idea to get a halter on her to keep her restrained, leaving enough rope to allow her to lie down if needed.

At this point I would like to again emphasize the importance of your herd veterinarian. NOW is the time to call for assistance if you are not comfortable proceeding with an examination.

Have a bucket of mild soap or disinfectant available for cleaning of yourself, the cow, and your equipment, such as obstetrical (OB) chains. Clean the cow's rectal and vaginal areas, and gently perform a vaginal exam using a plastic OB (palpation) sleeve to explore the situation: Is the calf in proper position? In a normal birth, you should feel the head resting upright between the two front legs. If you only feel legs, determine whether they are front legs or back legs by feeling up to the next higher joint. You cannot tell if the feet are front or back by just looking at the foot itself. Has the waterbag ruptured? Does the pelvic area seem wide enough to deliver the calf? If something wrong is found that cannot be easily corrected, or if you are uncomfortable further examining the cow yourself, call your veterinarian for consultation and/or assistance immediately.

Minor calving problems can often be resolved with minimal assistance. Again based on your level of comfort and experience, you may be able to manipulate the position of the calf to allow delivery. Obstetrical chains or straps can be used to provide assistance in delivery. When placing chains on the calf's legs, be sure to loop above and below the fetlock joint to avoid injury to the calf. A loop may also be placed around the head - over the poll behind the ears and through the mouth. Never attach a loop to the lower jaw or just around the neck. Always use plenty of lubricant. When pulling, time you're pulling with the cow's contractions. You may have to "stagger" your pulls to alternative sides to help the calf's shoulders clear the pelvis and avoid "shoulder-lock." If "hip-lock" occurs, the calf may need to be pushed back a bit, then rotated. Give yourself a time limit - if you try a technique for 5 minutes that isn't successful, it's time to try something different. Be sure to consult with a veterinarian for more complicated calving situations, or at any time when you think further assistance is needed. Don't wait until it's too late.

Have your facilities and equipment ready and available if problems should arise. Keep a "Calving Kit" ready prior to each calving season. How many times have you looked for a tool or piece of equipment and find it's not where you thought it was? Only put items you are comfortable using in your kit, and your kit should be checked and modified as necessary before each calving season.

Calving Kit

- Halter or rope
- Bucket, disinfectant, mild soap
- OB sleeves and OB lubricant
- OB chains/straps and handles (3 each)
- Eye hooks, head snare (optional)
- Calf puller (optional)
- **Veterinarian's phone number**

As always, observe the calving herd closely, paying special attention to first-calf heifers. You can also help prevent future calving problems by recognizing that there are many factors that contribute to a successful calving season such as nutritional management and

genetic

calving

come.

When do you assist?

General guidelines:

- Over 90 minutes since water bag seen with no progress
- Over 6 hours of restlessness, tail up with no progress
- Over 40-60 minutes of heavy straining with no progress
- Calf hooves visible and pointing up
- Only head or tail of calf seen



selection. Work with your veterinarian and extension specialist to be ready for this year and prevent problems in the years to