

Texas Dairy Matters

Higher Education Supporting the Industry

REVIEW CALVING PROCEDURES

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Spring is often thought of as a “time for new beginnings”. In the dairy industry calving can be thought of as a herd’s new beginning, since it initiates a new lactation for the cow and a new life for the calf.

Nearly 92% of dairy operations provide their employees with training on proper care at calving according to data from the National Animal Health Monitoring System Study. Most of the training (90.4%) occurs on-the-job, while 27% use discussion/lecture training.



There are three stages to calving. Stage 1 typically lasts 2 to 6 hours, although it may be longer in heifers. The cow is restless, the cervix is dilating and uterine contractions usually aren’t visible externally. Stage 2 on average takes less than 2 hours for mature cows and up to 4 hours in heifers. The uterine contractions are accompanied by visible abdominal contractions.

The majority of animals won’t need assistance, but if delivery takes longer than 2 to 3 hours for a heifer or one hour for a cow, calving assistance may be needed.

When assistance is needed, even the best trained employees can't do their job unless they have the proper equipment and supplies. Check that you have the following supplies readily available for assisting deliveries:

- Head catch to restrain cow
- Stainless steel bucket for water and disinfectant needed in delivery
- Convenient source of warm water
- Cup to dip water from the bucket when cleaning the cow
- Disinfectant and antiseptic soap or surgical scrub, as recommended by your veterinarian, for employees to clean their hands prior to assisting the cow and to clean the cow.
- Obstetrical sleeves and latex gloves. Check that your employees aren't allergic to latex.
- Obstetrical lubricant, 57.5% of operations use a commercial product.
- Stainless steel obstetrical chains with handles. Easiest to clean and sanitize between calvings. Replace when rusty. Store in a sanitary manner, **NOT** looped over the fence.
- Head snare to assist in delivery when head turned back.
- Towels or other clean cloth to dry the calf, particularly in cold weather.
- Tincture of iodine to dip the calf's navel
- Bristle brush to clean up equipment afterwards

Although some may add a calf jack to this list, use with extreme care since the extra force applied can injure both the cow and calf. Usually if two people can't deliver the calf or if an abnormal presentation cannot be manipulated into the correct position, it is time to contact the veterinarian for further assistance.

Stage 3 of calving is expulsion of the fetal membranes. Allow the membranes to detach on their own. Direct employees not to manually remove the membranes, as this increases the chance of infection.

Create written protocols for your employees to follow in the calving area. At least annually, review your standard procedures to make sure that all employees are following your guidelines. Train new employees as they are hired.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service has two publications (E-246, Recognizing and Handling Calving Problems and L-5242 Assisting Difficult Calving) available at <https://agrilifebookstore.org/> that provide detailed descriptions of how to assist in calving.

<http://texasdairymatters.org>

February, 2012

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