

Section 8



Calving and Calf Health

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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 do I manage diseases such as navel ill, scour and pneumonia?

Calving and Calf Health

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 (60% of their mature body weight at service), e.g. 330kg for Holstein-Friesian heifers.
- Choose an easy calving sire, particularly for heifers.
- Make sure your heifers are not too fat or too thin at calving; ideally they should have a body condition score of 3.0 to 3.5 (1–5 scale).
- 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.

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 feed it 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 and remove the calf quickly.
- Remove the calf from the cow after it has been licked to reduce its risk of picking up infections in the calving environment.
- Feed three litres of first milking colostrum within the first two hours of the calf's life. If the calf won't suck this volume from a nipple bottle or bucket, use a stomach tube. You should get training from your local vet in how to use this device safely.



② How do I manage diseases such as scour and pneumonia?

How to

Treat the scouring calf

- Scour (diarrhoea) is caused by infections picked up by the calf in the calving unit and calf house and from the cow and other calves.
- Because scour is infectious, you need to separate out the scouring calf from the other calves.
- Calves with scour die from dehydration so you must replace the fluids and electrolytes lost in the scour. Give one or two extra electrolyte feeds (two litres each) separate from the milk feeds.
- Keep the calf on undiluted milk or milk replacer as this helps the calf to recover from the bowel damage more quickly.
- Call the local vet if the calf's temperature is above 38.5-39.5°C or if the calf is down, weak or its eyes are sunken, or a lot of calves are affected by scour.
- If calf scour is an annual problem, you need to send some calf faeces or blood samples off to a vet lab to check what is the cause on your farm. This is important as some common causes do not respond to antibiotics (eg. cryptosporidiosis, coccidiosis and viral infections) and vaccination or other drugs may be an option.



How to

Prevent calf pneumonia

- Respiratory disease in calves is common and is caused by the spread of viral and bacterial infections in droplets exhaled by older stock and calves.
- Because disease spread is by airborne infections, good ventilation can limit transmission. Calf house ventilation details are given in the chapter on Replacement Heifer Management.
- As older stock are the main carriers of respiratory infections, young calves should never be housed in the same airspace as older stock.
- Ideally, calves housed individually or outdoors are at less risk of developing calf pneumonia.
- Calves can develop severe lung damage without obvious clinical signs, so you need to be vigilant to pick up on calves which are slow to drink, appear depressed, are slow to rise, have a nasal or eye discharge or are breathing heavily and check their temperature.
- Affected calves should be separated out and treated in accordance with your local vet's recommendations. Sometimes all the calves in the same airspace may need to be treated to prevent further cases occurring.
- If calf pneumonia is a recurring problem on your farm have a chat with your local vet about what samples might be useful to diagnose the causes.
- Based on this testing you may need to use a calf pneumonia vaccine.

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