Improving Calf Survival

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As dairies strive to increase the number of high-quality replacement animals, there are many factors to address.

This article starts with the very stump of the production tree - ways to increase survivability of the calf immediately before, during and after the calving process. Actions we take during these few hours will determine whether we have a potential replacement or a dead calf needing disposal.

Obviously, the first rule in getting a live calf is to keep an eye on the cow or heifer having it. She needs to be in a clean, dry, well-bedded maternity pen, located in a place where we are able to check her frequently. A calf's ultimate survivability is directly correlated to the dryness of the calving area. Infectious agents in wet calving areas lead to dead calves.

If the calving process starts and the cow is not making steady progress, check to verify the calf is positioned properly and is of the appropriate size for a normal vaginal delivery.

Whether or not to assist during the calving process will depend on a number of factors - the degree to which the cow is monitored, the skill of the work force and the goals and decisions of the farm manager. I take the position of trying to develop a highly skilled work force, and if in doubt, intervening with assistance. Your veterinarian can also play a key role, helping to develop protocols and training tailored to your operation, staff and needs.

As a general rule, heifers will need more assistance than a mature cow, but if any animal has been actively straining for an hour with no obvious progress, it's time to check her and see what is going on. Calvings that include the statement "she started yesterday, but then quit" seldom end up with a live calf.

Good obstetrical lubricant is imperative. In my decades of private practice, I delivered hundreds of calves that "wouldn't fit" when the producer was pulling, but when we added a copious amount of lubricant and gave a tug, we had a healthy calf. Use of adequate, good quality lubricant will increase your survival rates.

Another point is postural drainage of the calf immediately after birth. When the calf hits the ground it is flat on its side, and gravity helps fluids drain from the top lung but not the bottom. Stimulate the calf by sticking a piece of straw in its nose to make it sneeze, and then roll it over to the other side and repeat the process. Repeat this rolling every few minutes until the calf is trying to right itself and lay on its brisket. Many highly stressed calves will respond, increasing survival.

The most important action a person can take to increase his replacement heifer pool is to get an **adequate amount of good-quality colostrum** into the calf within the first hour after birth. This action alone will have more influence on the ultimate survivability of the calf than anything else you do during its early life. A Holstein calf needs a gallon (4 liters) of good-quality (by test) colostrum within the first hour, if we are to give it a good start in life. Blood test a few three-day-old calves periodically to verify that their serum protein levels are over 5.5, as an audit on your methods.

Genex has worked for decades to help produce profitable, long-lasting cows. Giving a calf a great start will help that calf join the milking herd and achieve its genetic potential.

Author Bio: After 25 years of private veterinary practice in northeastern Wisconsin, Dr. Roger Weigle now leads the cooperative's animal health programs and develops educational programs for Genex staff and member/customers.