

Bovine Newsletter Calving 101

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SPRING 2019

Let calving season begin! With a wide range of “calving seasons” throughout Simcoe County we thought now would be a good time to discuss some of the basics of the calving process, go over some tips and tricks, and give our recommendations on when to call the veterinarian.

Many people do not realize that there are actually three stages of calving or labour. Each stage has its own unique events and timeframes. It is important to recognize which stage your heifer or cow is in and ensure she is abiding by the appropriate time frame for her stage. Due to inexperience, heifers will often take longer in each stage than mature cows.

Stage	One	Two	Three
What happens	Relaxation stage – loosening of the pelvic ligaments and vulva Dilation of the cervix Restless behavior, tail swishing	Calf expulsion stage – “water breaks” followed shortly after by the calf	Fetal membrane expulsion stage – placenta should be expelled following the calf
Timeframe	4 – 12 hours	30 minutes – 4 hours	Up to 12 hours



The vast majority of heifers and cows will breeze through each stage of calving and produce a live calf at the end; we are not worried about these girls. Recognizing the heifers and cows that are not progressing as they should, especially during stage 2 of labour, will save more calves and even cows. Interestingly, calving difficulties account for up to 33% of all calf losses in beef herds; this is a number we can surely improve upon. Essentially, once the cow is in active labour where she is pushing, the water breaks, and the calf starts to appear, continual progress should be made until that

calf is out. Our recommendation is that if the cow is in stage 2 active labour and has not made progress in a span of 30 – 60 minutes we need to intervene. Intervention would be having a feel vaginally yourself to assess what is happening or calling the veterinarian. Additionally, examples of “not making progress” could be the cow is pushing but no feet are appearing; the cow is pushing with the calf’s feet exposed but nothing else appears, or the cow is pushing for some time then stops. The sooner we can identify heifers and cows that are not progressing through labour in a timely manner, the more likely we are to have a positive outcome.

Anyone who has been around calving cows long enough will know that there are endless positions a calf can get itself into while in the uterus that can make giving birth an impossible task.

There are two truly “normal” presentations for calves. The first, what is most commonly seen, and is called anterior. This is where the calf is coming right side up with both front legs and head forward. The second position, is posterior. This is where the calf is coming right side up with both back legs straight. With posterior calves there is an increased likelihood of having to assist the cow and it is key to get the calf out as quickly as possible once the hind end/hips are exposed as the umbilical cord often breaks at this stage and the calf will be starved for oxygen until it is completely out of its dam and breathing air. Identifying front versus back legs will help facilitate your decision-making on assisting in the calving as well. The easiest way to identify which limb you are dealing with is to feel which direction the first joint from the hoof bends, then work your way up to the next joint and feel which direction it bends. If the first and second joints bend in the same direction then you are dealing with front feet, so make sure you have a head with them before you start pulling. If the first and second joints bend in opposite directions then you are dealing with back legs and can start pulling without worrying about finding a head.



As previously mentioned, there is a huge range of different presentations calves may be in. For those that feel comfortable correcting some of these abnormal presentations we have a few important tips. When correcting “leg backs” or breach presentations it is very important to protect the uterus when you are pulling the limb up into the correct position. The hooves of the calf can tear the uterus as the limb is being pulled so it is best to cup the calf’s hoof with your hand as you pull to protect the uterus. When correcting “head backs” it is recommended to use the eye sockets to reposition the head instead of pulling on the jaw or the nose. You can very safely use your thumb and index finger in the calf’s eye sockets to move the head without doing damage to the eyes. Lastly, if you feel that

there is just not enough space when trying to get a limb in the correct position, especially when correcting a breach presentation, pushing the body of the calf away from you (towards the dam’s head) will allow you to have more space to work with at the back end.

Please remember that our veterinarians are on call 24/7, so there will always be someone you are able to reach to merely discuss what is happening with your calving heifer or cow or to come out and assist. We’ve put together a non-exhaustive list of potential reasons to give us a call for a calving:

1. No progress after 30 minutes to 1 hour
- If no calf appears 2 hours after the water appears/breaks - INVESTIGATE
2. Abnormal presentation you do not feel comfortable correcting
3. Cow is trying to calve but you cannot feel the calf
4. Upside down calf
5. Large calf that does not come with pulling/jacking
6. Cow is down, stops pushing
7. Placenta is coming with no calf
8. Discharge or fetus with abnormal or bad odour
9. Excessive bleeding
10. Vaginal or uterine prolapse
11. Intestines present from vulva

All of us at Central Ontario Veterinary Services wish all of our cow-calf producers the best of luck during calving season. Please do not hesitate to give us a call for advice or assistance.