



OABP Position Statement & Background Document: Disbudding & Dehorning Cattle

Position Statement

Dehorning in cattle refers to the removal of the horn after attachment of the horn bud to the skull, occurring at approximately two months of age. Disbudding refers to the removal or destruction of the horn bud prior to this time. **Disbudding is preferred over dehorning**; the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association recommends disbudding at three weeks of age or less.

The OABP recommends the use of both **local anesthetic** and **NSAID** for all methods of disbudding or dehorning. The addition of xylazine for sedation reduces handling stress but is not without risk; the OABP recommends use of xylazine be at the discretion of the prescribing veterinarian. Xylazine should never be used in lieu of local anesthetic or NSAID.

Background

The OABP position statement applies to disbudding or dehorning done by all persons (veterinarians, registered veterinary technicians, dairy producers, farm staff members, etc.); veterinarians should endeavor to discuss appropriate disbudding and dehorning practices with their bovine clients.

There is direct evidence that less invasive methods are less painful¹, and therefore disbudding is preferred over dehorning, with a small diameter burner so as to cause the least amount of tissue damage. Although disbudding at less than three weeks of age has been recommended by several organizations²⁻⁵, no research currently supports such a cut point.

Local anesthetic, applied as a cornual nerve block, effectively eliminates both behavioural and physiologic indicators of pain for approximately two hours when lidocaine is used.⁶ When local anesthetic is given alone, protracted rises in physiologic and behavioral indicators of pain occur after this time point, postulated to be due to inflammatory pain. The use of a NSAID given at the time of disbudding or dehorning virtually eliminates this protracted effect.^{7,8,9}

While xylazine reduces handling stress⁶, it is associated with temperature depression¹⁰ and should therefore be used with caution in nutritionally stressed calves in cold weather. There is potential for accidental overdose, however this may be mitigated by dispensing xylazine diluted in lidocaine. Human abuse potential does exist for xylazine¹¹; veterinarians should be aware of this risk.

Disbudding and Dehorning References

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