

When to Intervene... An Important Decision During Calvings

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We've all been there... Whether the cows need feeding, field work is calling or whatever duty needs getting done in the run of a day, you look over and a cow is calving. Your first thought is to stop what you're doing and get that calf out as quick as possible so that you can get back to your busy day and not come back to a worse situation right? Wrong... Sometimes pulling a calf too soon can do more harm than good.

There are three stages of calving. Being aware of what is expected during each stage can help you decide when you may need to intervene. By intervening too early you can interfere with the normal changes that occur during the calving process resulting in significant trauma to the cow and calf.

Stages of Labour

Stage 1: Dilation of the cervix

During this phase the cervix softens, and the pelvic ligaments begin to relax. A thick clear mucous may be seen hanging from the vagina. The cows feed intake usually starts to decrease. As this stage progresses, cows may appear uncomfortable by standing up and lying down repeatedly and looking for an area isolated from their herd mates. This stage can last anywhere from 2-24 hours.

Stage 2: Delivery of the calf

The appearance of the water bag signals the beginning of Stage 2, which is considered active labour. Cows are typically seen on their side having strong contractions or their tail is raised, and they are actively pushing/straining. This stage may last 30 minutes in cows and 60 minutes in heifers.

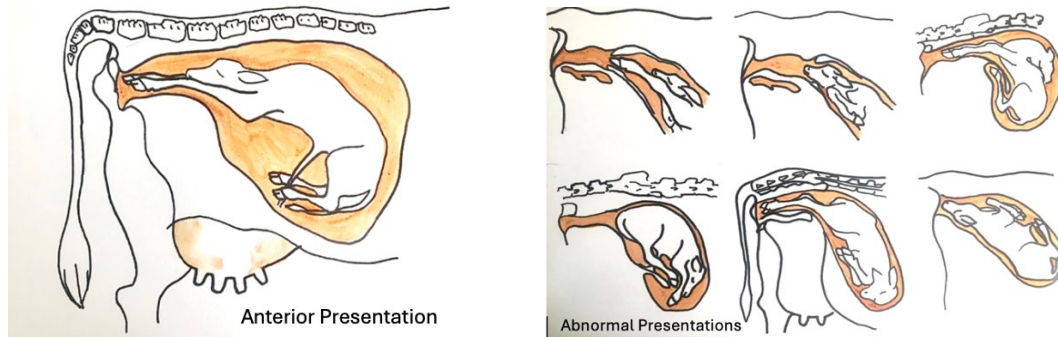
Stage 3: Delivery of the placenta

The delivery of the placenta can occur right away or within several hours. A placenta is considered retained after 24 hours. Cows who do not clean should be closely monitored in the first 14 days as they are at risk of developing metritis and requiring treatment.

When to intervene?

During the calving process visual checks (every 15-20 min) is recommended to monitor for progression. If no clear progression occurs within 30 minutes for cows or 60 minutes for heifers in stage 2 or contractions stop for an extended period of time, a vaginal exam should be performed. Prior to examination, the vulva should be cleaned with warm water and soap to prevent contamination. OB sleeves should be used for examination.

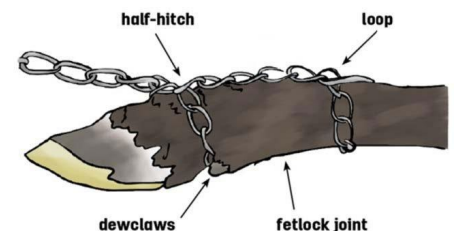
Normal anterior presentation includes the two front feet fully extended (pointing down towards the udder of the cow) and the head. Posterior presentation presents as two hind feet (pointing upwards towards the tailhead) and the tail of the calf. Some abnormal presentations causing dystocia include head back, breech, upside down or flexion of one or both front legs.



Not all presentations are textbook cases and there can be other causes that may not feel “normal” such as twins, deformed calf, fetal maternal disproportion and uterine torsions to name a few. What’s key for these calving difficulties is knowing your limits and when you should call a vet!

Once any abnormalities are corrected, it is important to remember the parts you need prior to pulling. For an anterior presentation, the two front legs and head must be in the birth canal to pull. For a posterior presentation, 2 hind legs and a tail that can be palpated must be in the birth canal to pull.

When using chains or ropes on the calf’s legs it is important that a double half hitch is used to spread out the force applied on the legs during the assisted delivery. Only applying one loop can result in broken bones.



Final tips to remember:

- Cleanliness and lubrication are key when dealing with dystocia cases.
- Take caution when using calving jacks- they apply 2-3x more force than two people pulling. Significant damage to the cow and calf can occur when used incorrectly.
- Human safety comes first- ensure cows are appropriately restrained while working with them.

References:

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