

Drying off a Calf

- **When to dry off the calf?**
- **How dry is “dry”?**
- **Calf coats go on dry calves!**
- **Towels and their care.**
- **Drying the calf – practical techniques that work.**

Please don't think that I have gone off the deep end in choosing this topic. In some circumstances this is a legitimate job. Normally, we think of the dam licking off the calf. After that, the calf “air dries.” That is, when the environment is warm enough we depend on evaporation to take care of what the dam did not remove.

But, what about in weather where the environment will not supply enough warm air to do the job? Then the calf's energy reserves are used to supply the heat. That is not good for calf survival. Doing the “drying” job is up to the care givers.

Further, what about the times when we are trying to control dam-to-daughter transmission of disease. Johne's disease is a good example. Doing the “drying” job is up to the care givers.

When to dry the calf?

Do I get the calf dry and then feed colostrum? Or, feed colostrum and then dry off the calf? Both need to be done as soon as practical after delivery. Drying off the calf will reduce heat losses dramatically. Feeding warm colostrum helps keep the calf warm from the inside out.

If the environment is well below freezing I lean toward drying off the calf first, then feed colostrum.

How dry is “dry”?

It is always going to be a matter of subjective judgment, how dry is “dry?” Let's start out agreeing that we should be practical in defining “dry.” What is our reason for wanting a dry hair coat? Dry hair does not stick to the calf's body. The hairs are erect. This creates a barrier of stationary air that works to partially insulate the calf from her environment.

Therefore I advise folks to aim for “fluff” dry. Fluff means that the hair stands erect, not lying flat against the body. Thus we get the stationary blanket of insulating air even though the individual hairs are not fully dry. Yes, you can use a hair dryer after “fluff dry” to get rid of the remaining moisture if time and location permit.

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Calf coats go on dry calves!

The effectiveness of calf coats is significantly compromised when they are put on wet calves. Get the calves at least “fluff” dry before putting on calf coats.

Towels and their care

Clean dry towels work great.

I have tried both 100 percent cotton, blends of cotton and poly fibers and 100 percent poly fibers. I really do not like the “all-poly” towels for this job. All they seem to do is spread the amniotic fluids around.

The blends and 100 percent cotton towels both do the job. I lean toward the all-cotton towels for drying with the least amount of effort on my part. They seem to be the most absorbent.

These towels are inexpensive at stores like Aldi’s. Caution - the colors run like crazy the first few times these inexpensive towels are washed – so don’t mix them with anything where color makes a difference. And, they tend to shrink a fair amount the first time they go through the dryer but, then, who cares?

Plan on washing the towels after every use. When it comes to using towels soaked with amniotic fluids from calving pens don’t even think about multiple uses. We are trying to limit exposure to pathogens rather than insure that every calf gets an infective dose of a whole army of them.

How many towels do we need? If the cow has already licked off the calf two towels work fine.

Plan on at least 4 bath-size towels for every birth where the care giver starts with a soaking wet calf. Once the towels get well used then the count could go up to six – it depends on how threadbare towels get before you replace them.

For farms drying many calves the best organization system I have seen used good sized plastic bins to store towels. Depending on herd size the bins can be larger or smaller. Plan on at least 3 bins – 1 for clean towels, 1 for soiled towels (both of these are out next to the calving area) and 1 that goes back and forth between the calving area and the washer/dryer area. Larger herds will need more than 3 bins.

By the way, clean bins help keep pathogen levels on the towels low. One dairy uses a fresh construction-size plastic waste bag to line the bins each time they load a bin with towels from the drier.

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Drying the calf

At first thought it does not seem as though much is involved in drying off a calf. Connect towel and calf. Rub. That is true. However, let's think about what we are trying to accomplish. The calf needs to get breathing well. Her circulation needs to be stimulated. Within roughly 30 minutes she needs to stand up. And, by the way, we need to get her dry.

I recommend giving first attention to breathing. Clear airways as needed. Roll the calf on to her belly. This belly-down position promotes full inflation of the lungs.

Then, go at it with the first towel. Rub her back from tail to head – against the grain of the hair coat just like Mom does.

Also, concentrate on her neck and shoulders since this where there are many nerve endings to stimulate getting her breathing well on her own. Getting her head cleaned off and dry will help, too.

Once we have her breathing well then I doubt if it makes any difference where we go from there. Be vigorous in your rubbing. Our aim is to stimulate circulation. Some folks like to rub around and around thinking that hair will “fluff” better than just wiping. I always get tired of drying before the calf is completely dry. So, the limits on drying are most likely to be us running out of either time or energy.

Now when the calf has a fluff-dry coat and is standing it is time for her first meal. I prefer to feed this first meal with her standing than having her lying down. The standing position with a slightly raised head takes advantage of gravity as the calf is swallowing. If the calf cannot stand always remember to keep her on her belly when she is fed.