

Calving Ease

March 2010

By Sam Leadley of Attica Veterinary Associates



Drying off a Calf

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. Then the calf "air dries." That is, the environment is warm enough so that we can depend on evaporation to take care of what the dam did not remove.

But, what about in weather where the environment will not supply warm enough air to do the job? Then the calf's energy reserves are used to supply the heat. 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.

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.

Towels and their care

Clean dry towels work great. I have tried both one-hundred percent cotton, blends of cotton and poly fibers and one-hundred 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 one-hundred 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 the dollar-type stores. 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 around amniotic fluids and 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? Plan on at least four 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 three bins – one for clean towels, one for soiled towels (both of these are out next to the calving area) and one that goes back and forth between the calving area and the washer/dryer area. Larger herds will need more than three bins. By the way, cleaning the bins helps keep pathogen levels on the towels low.

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 thirty 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. Concentrate on her neck and shoulders since this will contribute the most to 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 either running out of time or out of 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.

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Our thanks to Boehringer-Ingelheim Vetmedica for supporting this issue of
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