

# CALVING EASE

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## Special Care for the Dystocia Calf

- Calving difficulty, sometimes called dystocia, affects between 13 to 15 % of Holstein calves.
- 48-hour survival rates drop drastically for calves when deliveries require 2 or more persons, mechanical or surgical intervention compared to unassisted births.
- 120-day survival rates for calves when deliveries require 2 or more persons, mechanical or surgical intervention are 70 % less than unassisted births.
- Treatment rates are higher for dystocia calves (scours 17%, pneumonia 70%) compared to calves experiencing unassisted births.
- Providing special care, both in the first few hours and first two weeks, can cut both death losses and treatments for scours and/or pneumonia.

**Lots of stimulation during first few hours.** When these calves hit the ground they typically are “out of it.” Compared to calves with unassisted deliveries, usually they are

- less alert,
- slower to lift their head and roll onto their belly,
- longer to attempt to stand,
- slower heart beat,
- sub-normal body temperature,
- erratic breathing and
- less responsive to stimulation (for example, tweaking nose with a piece of straw to encourage breathing).

Actions for the first 15 to 30 minutes? Using a large cloth (for example a bath-size towel) rub the calf. Keep at it. Use more than one towel. Get the calf hair coat “fluff-dry.” Work at getting a strong breathing pattern. Experience suggests that lots of attention to the neck and shoulders helps. The name of the game here is stimulation – as intense as you can manage and be persistent. Increase the oxygen:carbon dioxide exchange rate – regular breathing is our goal to overcome oxygen deprivation. Normal heart rate should be in the range of 100 to 150 beats per minute.

If oxygen is available start supplementation as soon as the calf is on the ground. Welding-grade oxygen will work if medical-grade is not available. Start oxygen flowing through a

small plastic tube. Adjust the flow to get a gentle flow on your cheek. If you do not have a mask slip the tube up into the calf's nose roughly the width of your hand. If you can tape the tube in place fine. At least keep oxygen flowing until the calf is too active to keep the tube in place.

Feeding colostrum? It is fairly common for calves with unassisted deliveries to nurse within one to two hours. Unless there is a lot of swelling in the tongue and mouth that clearly prevents nursing and you cannot feel any suckling response within two hours, work at getting the dystocia calf to drink from a nursing bottle.

If necessary, come back several times in the first three to four hours. Compared to feeding with an esophageal tube feeder using a nursing bottle provides a good opportunity to persistently stimulate the calf. Use this opportunity to do more rubbing with a towel. Try to get the calf to stand.

### **Follow up for the next two weeks**

- Be sure the persons giving calf care know which calves had hard deliveries.
- Encourage identification of dystocia calves. Mark the pen or hutch – use duct tape, colored clothes pins, or shower curtain rings. Mark the calf as soon as she is dry – keep an all-weather livestock marker (for example, Twist-Stik, LA-CO Markal) right in the calving area.
- Routinely plan to give extra attention to these flagged calves. In individual pens watch to see how quickly she gets up and moves at feeding time. Look for abnormally loose manure. At feeding time keep track of whether or not she drinks all her milk. Is she slower than usual in drinking today? Any cloudy or discolored nasal discharge?

In group pens have a checklist to be sure every flagged calf is observed carefully at least four times a day. Look for signs of scours – wet soiled tail, slowness in getting up and moving around that might be a sign of dehydration. Look for signs of a respiratory infection – shallow breathing, more rapid than normal breathing rate, abnormal discharge from her nose – amount and color.

- Timely treatment is essential for successful therapy. Work with the herd veterinarian to establish the appropriate antibiotic therapy for these “high-risk” calves. Agree on the drug, dose, duration and route of administration. Write this down. Train every calf care person to achieve timely and consistent treatment.

References: Tomlinson, S., J. Lombard, F. Garry, & V. Khunkhun, "The Relationship between dystocia and dairy calf morbidity and mortality" at [www.cvmb.colostate.edu/ilm](http://www.cvmb.colostate.edu/ilm) accessed December 29, 2011. USDA NAHMS Dairy 2007 Study [http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal\\_health/nahms/dairy/downloads/dairy07/Dairy07\\_is\\_CalvingInt.pdf](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/nahms/dairy/downloads/dairy07/Dairy07_is_CalvingInt.pdf) accessed December 29, 2011.

If you know of someone that doesn't currently receive **Calving Ease** but would like to, tell them to **WRITE** to **Calving Ease**, 11047 River Road, Pavilion, NY 14525 or to **CALL** 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or **FAX** (585-591-2898) or **e-mail** [calvingease@rochester.rr.com](mailto:calvingease@rochester.rr.com) with Subscribe as the subject. Back issues may be accessed on the Internet at either [www.atticacows.com](http://www.atticacows.com) or [www.calfnotes.com](http://www.calfnotes.com) and clicking on the link, Calving Ease.

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