

Calving

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Every year we have bovine maternity cases where the result could have been a lot happier if the owner knew what was normal and abnormal. So here is a quick overview and advice on assistance.

Normal

First stage:

Cervix dilating. Cow separates from other cattle, appears uncomfortable, may have tail raised, back arched and gets up and down.

This may go on for up to six hours, sometimes longer in heifers.

Second stage:

Cow is usually down and straining.

Water bag out.

May get up, walk around for a few minutes, and then go down again, pushing hard.

Calf's front legs and head appear and cow makes steady progress with delivery.

Average time one to two hours, may be up to four.

Third stage:

Passing membranes, usually within eight hours.

ABNORMAL

First Stage:

Investigate if there has been no progress at all after six hours. You will need to put the cow in a race with a secure pole behind her. Wash the perianal and vulval area. Examine the vagina and cervix using plenty of lubricant, warm soapy water will do.

Possible problems...

If the vagina has a tight spiral feel, this indicates a uterine torsion. Stop and call your Vet.

Is the cervix fully open? If you feel a tight ring about 20cms into the vagina, about the diameter of your fist or smaller, then the cow is most likely still in first stage labour. Give her more time.

If there is a bad smell call your Vet.

Second stage:

Investigate or call a Vet

- if nothing showing after two hours of pushing
- if things have stopped for twenty minutes or more
- if things look abnormal e.g. just the head showing

Possible problems...

Check cow as described above under First Stage. If the cervix is fully dilated, there are no twists in the vagina and it smells OK, examine the position and size of the calf in the uterus.

If you have no idea what you are feeling, call your Vet.

Calf to big or cow to small

Foetal oversize or maternal undersize is not always that easy to asses but if the head and front legs are all there, but the cow is making no progress it is most likely the cause. Put ropes on the front legs above the fetlocks and pull. You may need to guide the head into the birth canal as well. You can pull as hard as you can, but don't use tractors, motor bikes or wire strainers. "Calf pullers" should only be used if you know what you are doing. If you are not making progress within about ten minutes, call your Vet. Too much strain or if the calf is stuck in the birth canal for too long, can cause hind limb paralysis of the cow. She is also likely to need pain control, so talk to your Vet.

Calf presentation

If the calf is coming with two front legs and the head then this is OK to pull. Sometimes the elbows may be flexed so pull one leg first then the other to straighten them. If it doesn't come, the calf is either too big or there is a malpresentation such as "dog siting" where the back legs are coming too. Call your Vet.

Just the head coming. This needs correction. You will need to push the head back, bring the legs up cupping the hooves with your hand as you flex them forward so you don't damage the uterus.

Head and one leg. Don't pull. Get the other leg up into the birth canal as well, then pull.

Two legs but no head. Check they are front legs. The head needs to be brought up and turned forward. Sometimes it is easier to put a rope on one of the legs and push it back to give you more room to get the head. When you have the head up, use your rope and hand to guide the leg back up.

Two back legs. Check they are back legs (there will be a tail somewhere there, or feel the first two joints, the fetlock and hock bend opposite ways whereas with front legs, the fetlock and knee bend the same way.) If you have two back legs you are OK to pull.

Backside presented (Breech). Nothing will be showing externally except the bag or membranes. The back legs need to be brought up into the birth canal. This is difficult and dangerous (you can tear the uterus) unless you know what you are doing so call your Vet.

Finally. When the calf is born, check the cow for any damage to the uterus, cervix or vagina. Check there is not another calf hiding in there somewhere. If it has been a hard pull or there has been internal interference by you, talk to your Vet about pain control, antibiotics and oxytocin.

Third stage

Retained placenta (more than 24 hours)

If cow is dull and not eating, ring your Vet.

If the placenta is retained for three days, ring your Vet.

Note these times are for cows – not mares.