PHOTO BY JOHN DENTON

Calving Out
Heifers

Tips on how to help first-time mommas.

by **Heather Smith Thomas**

First-calf heifers generally need more assistance than cows. Two reasons for this fact are that heifers are not fully grown and they have somewhat smaller pelvic areas. It's a good idea to keep first-calf heifers under close eye prior to calving.

When to assist
If you are watching the heifer you'll know when she begins early labor — restless and uncomfortable — and when she starts active labor — breaking water and straining. Sometimes a heifer's water will break but she will not progress because the calf is not entering the birth canal. Strong abdominal straining only begins when some part of the calf starts through the canal. If she does not begin hard labor, the calf is malpresented.

Robert Cope, DVM from Salmon, Idaho, advises, "If the heifer is not working hard to calve within two to four hours of breaking her water, get a hand inside her to determine what is going on. A heifer should remain in hard labor no more than one hour before assistance is rendered. Even if feet and nose are showing, go ahead and pull the calf by the end of this time. Studies have shown that heifers who work a shorter period of time to calve breed back earlier."

It can be a hard decision whether to intervene when a heifer is obviously calving but not yet in hard labor or making slow or no progress. Cope says, "It is better to assist cows who don't need help than to neglect one that does. As long as you stay clean and well lubricated, you're unlikely to cause damage by examining a cow manually. If she's acting suspiciously or laboring without progress, check her."

It's best to detect and correct problems early, while you still have a live calf. A malpresentation may mean there is not enough room for the calf to come through. A small pelvic opening may be the reason the head or leg is turned back.

How to help
If the heifer is not yet in hard labor she will still be mobile. You'll need to restrain her in order to check her. But if she is working hard at pushing (the calf's feet and nose are showing), she will be down on the ground in hard labor and less likely to try to get up. You may be able to sneak up quietly behind her, especially in a barn stall, to attach chains to the calf's legs and begin pulling.

Generally once you begin pulling on the calf, the heifer will settle down to hard straining and not try to get up. You can then pull as she strains and rest as she rests. Many heifers need only minimal assistance, without a calf puller. The strength of one or two people is adequate, and you are less apt to hurt the calf or the heifer.

Is the calf too big to be pulled?
If you see feet but no head, and it does not soon appear, the calf is probably a tight fit through the pelvis. Reach in to find if the head is turned back or starting to enter the birth canal. If positioned properly and starting to come, you must determine if it will fit.

Experience is the best teacher in this decision, says Cope, but there are tips that may help. "Try to feel over the top of the calf's forehead. Usually if there is not enough room for the calf's head, it will hit on the bony pelvis. A good rule of thumb — if the cow's pelvis hits the calf between the eyes, a Caesarean should be performed."

Persistent hymen
Often you'll encounter a heifer with labor progressing nicely until the feet and possibly the nose begin to show, and then she stops. If you reach in, you'll find a strong band of connective tissue a few inches inside the birth canal.

Cope says, "As a general rule, a calf that appears to be a tight fit even though his nose is visible is hung up on a persistent hymen." These rings of tissue are common in heifers and the stretching or breaking of these is a painful process.

"Some heifers will simply quit pushing when this pain occurs. This is one reason I like to pull a calf whose nose is showing, even if the heifer does not appear to be in trouble. Applied traction will usually pop him out rather quickly," Cope says.

In these instances, it works well to have one person pulling on the calf's legs while another person stretches the rings of tissue each time the heifer strains.

Calf puller use
In most cases, heifers' calves can be pulled by hand. There is less danger of hurting the cow (or killing or crippling the calf) this way than by using a calf puller. Cope says every year he sets broken pasterns, fetlocks and cannon bones that have been fractured by use of a calf puller.

These injuries are unnecessary. "When you put chains on the calf, make sure the first loop is above the fetlock joint," Cope explains. "Then half hitch the chain around the calf's pastern. This takes mere seconds and can save weeks of recuperation for the calf. A single loop may pull the calf's leg at an awkward angle, causing joint damage or a fractured bone. Double looping puts a straight pull on the leg."

After chains are applied to the calf's legs, "shorten the puller or extend its cable to obtain as much leeway as possible for pulling, especially if the calf is backward. Few things are as frustrating as the sudden realization you have run out of pulling room and the calf's shoulders and head are still inside the cow."

Cope says a puller is designed to work as a lever with an added advantage of enabling the operator to keep whatever progress the cow has made from slipping back. "The most

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important aspect of the puller comes from its up-and-down motion. When ready to pull the calf, have the puller straight out. After taking up all slack, slowly bring the end down toward the level of the cow's feet as far as possible. Lift the puller back up to its original position, take up the slack you gained and repeat the process until the calf's head pops out. Now, you can use the winch to get the calf on out."

Hiplock

If the calf's hindquarters are large, you may get him out to the hips and then he's stuck; his hipbones are too wide to come through the pelvis. Take time at this point to get him breathing once his ribcage is free of the birth canal. This will buy you time to get him out.

If pulling by hand, pull straight down toward the cow's feet, then pull the calf between her legs, toward her belly. This raises the calf's hips to the highest point of her pelvic opening, where it is widest, and he will usually pop out.

If using a calf puller, loosen the tension and roll the cow onto her back. Cope says, "With the cow on her back, bring the puller to an upright position and tighten the tension as much as possible. Now, bring the end of the puller across the cow's belly, pulling toward her head. This rotates the calf's hips so the upper portion is brought ahead before hitting the lower part of the cow's pelvis. When the puller rod passes center and starts down toward the cow's head, the breech spanner will slide off the cow and into the calf's abdomen. While this looks harmful to the calf, it merely helps push the calf out."

Heifer paralysis

If a calf is large, or pulled with force, the cow may be temporarily paralyzed after the birth. The cow's obturator nerve runs along each side of the pelvic cavity, says Cope. "If this nerve is stretched by the calf coming through, the cow may be unable to pull her legs inward to stand." Often one hind leg is more affected than the other, depending on which side the cow was lying. Paralysis may last a few hours or a few days.

Cope says this usually results from pulling a calf too large for the birth canal, but "it may occur from the cow's own efforts to expel the calf."

"Pulling a calf that should have been removed by C-section will almost always leave the cow paralyzed," Cope says. After any difficult birth, encourage the cow to get up as soon as possible. The longer she lies, the more likely she will have trouble with her hind legs or prolapse her uterus if she continues to strain. **HW**

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