

Calving Problems How To Avoid Them

Randy D. Volkmer, D.V.M

Heifers have more calving difficulty (dystocia) than do mature cows. Dystocia is characterized by prolonged or difficult labor. This is usually a result of a large (heavy birth weight) calf or small pelvic area (birth canal) of the mother. Death of these calves and sometimes their mothers is a result of injuries received during the delivery. This lowers your calf crop and potential profits. Cows that have problems calving seem to have trouble re-breeding as well. Consequently, you the beef producer need to make every effort to avoid Dystocia.

Causes of Dystocia

One common problem to avoid is improper selection and feeding of your replacement heifers. Small, underdeveloped heifers have more problems with dystocia than bigger properly developed heifers. The reason for this is their pelvic area. The larger heifers usually have a larger pelvic area. Heifers should be fed to weigh approximately 75% of their mature weight before breeding (usually around 14 months).

It is commonly believed that the effect of feeding prior to calving is directly correlated to dystocia. This is partially true. Excess energy feed is not as much of a problem as excess protein. High levels of protein will increase birth weights of the calf, leading to increased incidence of dystocia. Therefore, it is important for you to pay attention to the amount of protein fed to heifers during gestation. If you put heifers on high protein winter grass (rye, clover, or oats) try to limit their grazing to less than a half hour per day. Do not let them graze continuously day in and day out. Some people believe you can starve heifers and prevent dystocia. This is simply not true, and will result in reducing your heifer's body condition, and lowering her chance of re-breeding.

As heifers mature, their pelvic areas grow. Many producers feel that heifers calving at three years of age instead of two will help reduce incidence of dystocia. This will lower but does not eliminate dystocia. In addition heifers calving at three years will have lower productivity over their lifetime.

Improper presentation (breech, head back, leg turned back) can cause problems. This is a time when she needs your help or a veterinarian's help. The reason for this type of problem is unknown and it's incidence is relatively low.

The above factors affect dystocia but, not nearly as much as heavy birth weights. As birth weights increase so does the level of dystocia, especially in small under developed heifers.

There are three major factors affecting the birth weight of a calf. The first is the sex of the calf, bull calves weigh more than heifers. Obviously we cannot control this efficiently. The second is nutrition. This can be controlled by monitoring the protein intake of heifers. The third is the genetic influence of the bull on birth weight. Most bulls have Expected Progeny Differences (EPD's) that can be utilized to predict the birth weights of their offspring. Bulls with low birth weight EPD's will most often sire calves with lighter birth weights. Using a bull with known EPD's can go a long way toward eliminating dystocia.

To avoid calving problems, keep these three objectives in mind:

- 1. Choose the heaviest large frame heifers as replacements.**
- 2. Feed them so they develop properly.**
- 3. Mate them to an easy calving bull (low birth weight EPD).**

This approach will dramatically reduce the level of dystocia in your herd.

As you can see there are a number of factors that can influence dystocia. With good management most all of them can be controlled, resulting increased productivity in your cow herd.