

ASSISTED DELIVERY

Veterinarian offers tips for correcting malpresentations at calving.

Story & photos by Troy Smith, field editor

Many if not most cow-calf producers eagerly anticipate the coming of calving season, anxious to see the latest calf crop. However, the season can be colored by angst, too, when producers must deal with calving difficulty.

In an ideal world, all cows and heifers would calve unassisted, but in the real world it's advantageous for producers to know how to recognize dystocia and to know when and how to intervene in the delivery of a calf.

During the 2019 Range Beef Cow Symposium hosted in Mitchell, Neb., Iowa State University Veterinarian Caitlin Wiley discussed parturition in the bovine female — what is normal and what

is not. Using models of a cow and calf, she demonstrated various techniques for rendering assistance.

Three stages

Wiley summarized the three stages of parturition:

1) The first stage she described as the two- to eight-hour period during which the cervix becomes relaxed and dilated and the fetus rotates into position for delivery.

2) The second stage begins with rupture of the allantoic sac, or water bag, followed by uterine contractions and delivery of the calf. Stage 2 may be as short as 30 minutes (cows) or as long as four hours (heifers), she noted.

3) Expulsion of fetal membranes, representing the third stage of labor, should follow.

Checking for problems

Wiley explained that when dystocia is suspected, vaginal palpation allows assessment of cervical dilation, calf viability and the presentation, position and posture of the calf. She advised application of liberal amounts of lubrication to gloved hands and

arms when making an assessment and while aiding delivery.

“When you palpate, a key to success is to use both arms,” said Wiley. “Depending on the calf’s orientation, you may be able to manipulate better with one arm versus the other. Heifers, especially, have tight vaginal canals. Using both arms, you can manually stretch the vaginal canal to prevent tears and ease delivery.”

Assisting delivery

Talking about tools used in aiding delivery, Wiley stated a preference for obstetrical chains, over straps or ropes, because they are easier to clean and disinfect.

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She recommended that the obstetrical toolbox include three long (60-inch) chains and two handles.

“You may not need the extra length, but it can be a life-saver when you do,” said Wiley, advising attaching a chain to any accessible limb because it is much easier to retrieve a limb if a chain is already attached. Demonstrating how chains are to be applied to the calf’s legs to aid delivery, Wiley advised placement of a loop well above the fetlock and a half-hitch below the fetlock.

She also demonstrated use of a head snare, which is used to bring the calf’s head into a favorable position, reminding producers that the head should not be a primary pulling point. Pulling pressure is applied to the legs only during extraction.

Regarding the amount of pressure that should be applied, Wiley said one strong person on each of two legs is generally

considered acceptable. As a key to success, she advised producers to work with the cow, applying pulling pressure when the cow has contractions, maintaining tension while she rests and resuming pressure when contractions resume.

After discussing techniques for correcting common calf malpresentations, Wiley offered advice for postdelivery management of the calf. She recommended that, after placing the calf on its sternum, its nostrils and mouth should be cleared of debris. Vigorous rubbing applied to the ribcage will help stimulate breathing. Tickling the nostrils with a clean piece of straw can induce the calf to sneeze and expel fluid and mucus from nasal passages.

Wiley concluded by reminding producers that early intervention may be essential to aiding dystocia, and producers presented with a case for which they are



Iowa State University Veterinarian Caitlin Wiley summarized the three stages of parturition and explained how to provide assistance during parturition.

unprepared should not hesitate to seek assistance from a veterinarian or a more experienced person.

View the PowerPoint for this presentation in the Newsroom at www.rangebeefcow.com. Angus Media provides online coverage of the event courtesy of sponsorship by Leachman Cattle of Colorado.

For additional resources on

assisting at delivery, find these resources online:

- ▶ *Assisting the Beef Cow at Calving Time* (<http://bit.ly/MU-calving>)
- ▶ *Recognizing and Handling Calving Problems* (<http://bit.ly/TAMU-calving-1>) |

Editor’s note: Troy Smith is a freelancer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.