



HAVE WHAT YOU NEED, WHEN YOU NEED IT

Keep these tools close by for calving season success.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

When everything goes right, your calving tools are pretty simple. There might be a temptation to travel light. But, when everything goes wrong, you need quick access to anything that might make you more successful in that moment.

“These are potentially life-or-death situations,” says veterinarian Phillip Kesterson, who owned a

practice at Bridgeport, Neb., for several decades before starting with the technical services team at

Zoetis. “You need to be prepared to intervene, so you have a positive outcome.”

The first step to a well-stocked toolbox is to have it portable, ready to go, and in the vehicle or shed you’ll use for calving.

“When you need it, you need to have it with you,” Kesterson says. “If you don’t have the appropriate

supplies with you, by the time you go back and get them, there’s probably been another emergency.”

What’s in your box?

Lindsay Waechter-Mead, veterinarian at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Great Plains Veterinary Educational Center, has a list of calving season must-haves:

- ▶ **Your veterinarian’s contact information.** “It’s essential that everyone knows who to call when an emergency would happen,” Waechter-Mead says. If you use a multi-vet practice, she suggests getting to know all of them prior to that first calf hitting the ground.
- ▶ **A rope.** A halter or a lariat will do, Waechter-Mead says, noting it’s useful in a variety of situations, from keeping a heifer secure in a headcatch to helping a cow lie down. It comes in handy for restraining a leg when milking a cow, too.

“Number one, we don’t want to get kicked, and number two, we don’t want her to kick over that bucket of colostrum. That’s very important.”
- ▶ **OB sleeves and lubrication.** “There’s never really too much lube,” she says. Toothpaste-size tubes fit well in a toolbox, or a gallon jug can be pared down to a squirt bottle. Having well-fitting sleeves will make the exam more effective.

“We use our fingers to ‘see’ everything that’s in there, and I want to make sure I can feel things well,” Waechter-Mead says.

- ▶ **Disinfectant.** Mild soap and water will work, or more advanced options like a chlorhexidine solution can be diluted in warm soapy water. She uses it to clean equipment (chains and straps) or the animal prior to an exam. Iodine works to keep a calf navel clean, especially in a wet or muddy situation.

- ▶ **Towels or rags.** “If we’ve pulled this calf, we want to

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make sure that we go to help stimulate it and clean it off just like mom would,” Waechter-Mead says. Using a towel to rub it vigorously stimulates the phrenic nerve — the one that goes to the diaphragm and helps with those early breaths.

► **Needles and syringes.** Have plenty of needles and syringes available and be sure to check that you have some smaller sizes, such as 16-gauge or 18-gauge. They’ll be used to administer medicine, but Waechter-Mead says they can also be employed to do acupuncture to stimulate breathing.

“If you take a 22-gauge needle and you perpendicularly place that right into the nose and give it a little twist, it will stimulate the central nervous system so that they also take a breath,” she notes. “It doesn’t work every single time, but it doesn’t hurt as long as your needle is small enough.”

► **Basic medications.** At any point you may need a broad-spectrum antibiotic or other treatments, which you should discuss one-on-one with your veterinarian. Check expiration dates and handling instructions before the season starts.

“As we consider vaccination, proper vaccine handling is critical,” Kesterson says. “Too hot, and we risk decreased efficacy; freezing adds an additional risk of adverse side effects.”

► **Calf feeder.** Waechter-Mead emphasizes the need for a clean calf feeder, with no roughness or chewed edges. Tubing a calf isn’t an easy task, and she says getting a veterinarian to teach you prior to calving will help you learn the “landmarks” in the calf’s esophagus.

► **Colostrum.** That calf feeder could be a critical tool, because the importance of colostrum

ingestion is second only to getting a live calf on the ground, says Kesterson. “We set the stage for lifetime health, performance and production.” (See “Immunity of champions.”)

► **Chains and a calf jack.** When a cow needs assistance, chains are usually the first option. A calf jack can be helpful, but only if it’s working with the cow. “If it’s you and another person and you’re not making any progress, a calf jack is not the answer at that point,” Waechter-Mead says.

The keeper of calving

The best toolbox still needs a master — someone who knows how to use it precisely.

“Most people wait too long to intervene with calving, and then they get in too big of a hurry,” says Diana Matheson, veterinarian and commercial rancher from Walden, Colo.

People panic.

“What you want to do is mimic Mother Nature,” she advises.

That means intervening when necessary and when there’s been no progress in a given timeline, but then slowing down and letting the cow dilate once you’ve corrected a malpresentation, for example.

“The only time to hurry when pulling a calf is when it’s backward, but you still want to make sure she is dilated before you hurry,” she says.

Knowing when to call for help is sometimes the most important decision.

“No one ever wants a cesarean, but properly done and in the right time frame, it often results in the best outcome,” Kesterson says.

Observation is a powerful tool, but only when done right, he notes.

“Walk softly,” Kesterson says.

The right conditions can help, such as a calving camera, a peep hole in a maternity barn or even low lighting to avoid the flashlight-to-the-face check.

“The less we can disrupt the

Immunity of champions

“Colostrum is more important than an ear tag,” says Phillip Kesterson.

It’s not that he doesn’t believe in recordkeeping; it’s that he believes that strongly in the importance of that liquid gold.

As he should.

The bovine placenta is unique in that antibodies do not cross the placenta during pregnancy. Cows pass their antibodies to their calves through their colostrum.

Giving the new mom and baby time to bond is about more than just a good latch.

“When they’re born, there is no immune system. Think of them like a blank slate,” says Lindsay Waechter-Mead. “The only way they’re going to get that immunity is if they go take that first meal from mom.”

There is a finite amount of time from when a calf ingests anything to when the gut closes, and absorption is no longer possible. Without successful passive transfer, risk for both sickness and preweaning mortality go up significantly, she says. It also has fat and energy, which is important for thermoregulation.

Timing is important, and so is the correct product. One option is freezing any excess from a previous milking or to use a donor cow. If you need to purchase a product, low-quality supplements aren’t the answer. Have a colostrum replacement product on hand, Kesterson says.

“These are not inexpensive, but you’re investing in this calf’s performance and productivity,” he says.

natural progress and progression, the more successful our outcome,” he says.

That’s why Matheson doesn’t leave for the calving pasture without binoculars to observe a cow in labor or to be sure that the calf has nursed after birth.

The list of tips could go on and on: Good facility design matters. Carry a thermos of hot water for mixing electrolytes. Use an old sweatshirt as a makeshift way to

keep a calf warm and clean when transporting. Take records early on.

“My thoughts are a combination of philosophy and task,” Kesterson says.

That and years of experience that have taught him preparedness pays in almost every scenario. |



PHOTO BY MIRANDA REIMAN

Editor’s note: Waechter-Mead shared calving-season tips during the “Spring Calving Strategies” Angus University webinar. To watch her full presentation online, visit: <https://www.angus.org/university>.