

Postnatal Care

Whittier, Larson provide tips for how to care for cow and calf after delivery.

Story by
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A cattleman's job doesn't end when a live calf hits the ground. Following are some possible problems that could occur immediately after calving.

As soon as the calf is born, the most important consideration is whether or not it's breathing. Tickling the calf's nose with straw or rubbing vigorously may assist the breathing process, Colorado State University animal scientist Jack Whittier says.

He recommends producers avoid hanging the calf upside down, which is commonly done to drain fluids from the calf. "That basically puts pressure on the diaphragm so the calf *can't* breathe," Whittier says.

"A calf that does not want to stand up should be positioned so the front half of the calf is slightly lower than the rear half," says University of Missouri Extension veterinarian Bob Larson.

The next concern is to disinfect the calf's navel, usually with iodine, to prevent infection. This is especially important if the calf either will not get up or is born in an unsanitary environment.

One of the best ways to stave off any other troubles with the calf is to provide it with nutrition early. "If you've had to assist the cow in calving, that may be the best time to get some colostrum into the calf," Whittier says. "You don't want the calf to go more than a few hours without having been up to suck."

If the calf and cow will stand, it may be best to let the calf suck while the cow is confined. If either won't stand, the cow can be milked and the calf given the colostrum through a bottle or esophageal feeder.

In certain climates, hypothermia might be a concern after calving. While the best way to prevent this is having a dry, sheltered area for calving, Larson says, "newborns may require several hours indoors or several minutes in a heating box to raise their body temperature" if shelter is unobtainable.

"Right after birth, the best thing that can happen to the calf is for the cow to lick it off. Not only does that dry the calf, it also stimulates it," Whittier says.

"Having a dry calf with a full stomach of milk is a good protector against cold stress."

If a cow must be assisted during calving, injuries are a possibility. "Any kind of excessive draining or bleeding would be a concern," Whittier says. Any rips or tears in the vaginal membranes, birth canal or uterus should be treated by a veterinarian.

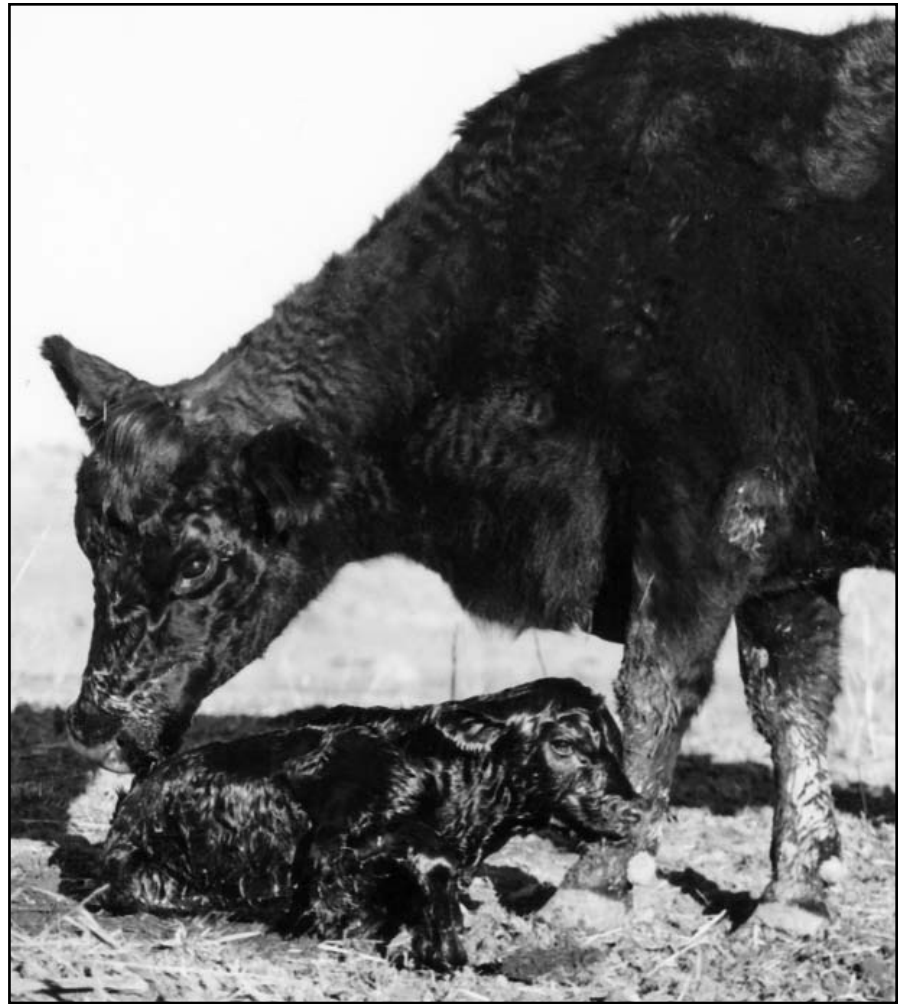
Other signs of trauma or infection include droopiness to the eyes or ears, or if the cow stops eating. "Near the time of calving, they'll go off feed for a few hours, but with a normal birth and delivery, they'll come right back on feed," Whittier explains. "If they stop eating, there may be something internally that isn't right and ought to be explored."

An obvious cause of alarm and immediate need for help is a prolapse, which is an eversion of the uterus. "Confine the cow wherever she is," Larson says, "and don't move her until a veterinarian gets there." Without immediate attention, a prolapse can result in shock and death.

Sometimes, especially if the calf must be pulled, a cow's nerves can be injured to the point that she cannot get up. Often, time is all that is necessary, as a cow may simply be exhausted. However, Whittier recommends leaving a downed cow for no longer than six to eight hours. "Certainly by 12-18 hours, if she hasn't made a real good attempt to get up, then she probably can't and will need some assistance," he says.

If a cow remains down, she will need nursing care. In addition to feed and water, Larson recommends physical therapy, such as lifting her or rolling her from one side to the other. A veterinarian should be consulted about the cow's chances for recovery and any treatment plan.

Finally, the cow's placenta is usually expelled two to eight hours after calving, but can be retained, sometimes resulting in infection. "Generally, a retained placenta is not an emergency," Larson says. "If the placenta is still retained three days after calving, treating the cows with injectable antibiotics may be helpful." You should not attempt to manually remove the placenta.



"The pair should be moved to a nursery pasture (different than calving pasture) within 24 hours after birth unless the pair has not bonded or there are other problems," says MU Extension veterinarian Bob Larson. [PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL]