

# Calving On The Croft and Smallholding



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Part of the Season With Cattle series of 3 webinars and publications aimed at crofters and smallholders, each covering a key time in the cattle year.

## Calving words to remember

### Patience, Cleanliness and Lubrication!

#### Safety matters

Your safety **MUST** come first. Don't take chances – all cows can be dangerous at calving. Often it's the '*she's a quiet cow*' or '*she's never done that before*' when incidents happen.

Ensure that the cow/ heifer is properly restrained, for example with a cattle crush or calving gate. Remember to tie the cow low down to stop them choking if they go down.

#### Patience

- Most cows will manage to calve themselves so give them time but monitor closely. Damage can be caused by interfering too soon.
- Remember there are two water bags—calves can live for several hours in the second water bag.
- Don't be afraid to have a feel—if you can feel the head and two front legs, and the cow is happy, leave her for a little while. If the calf is breech however, you have less time.
- There is no set timeline. Remember that nobody knows your cows better than you.



#### Lubrication

- Have obstetrical lubricant gel or mild non-detergent soap, along with gloves in your calving kit.

#### Cleanliness

- Calving pens must be clean and well bedded, and the equipment to be used should also be scrupulously clean.
- Check calving equipment and essentials are ready in advance.



## The Importance of Colostrum

Calves are born without any immunity and so failure to uptake adequate antibodies from colostrum will leave them at high risk of infections.

- **1 in 3 calves** don't get enough colostrum.
- Calves with inadequate colostrum intake are **2.5 times more** likely to die in the first four months of life.

The best scenario for colostrum intake is:

- No assistance at calving.
- Good suck reflex & calf is seen sucking hard for 20mins.

## When To Give Calves Colostrum

Calves need colostrum as soon as possible after birth. Most calves naturally will get up and suck however consider giving colostrum to calves:

- Born by assisted calvings.
- Poor suck reflex.
- Twins.

### Things to Think About

- Have a stomach tube in your calving kit and tube feed calves with **3 litres** of it's dam's colostrum after birth (within 2 hours).
- Powdered colostrum contains fewer antibodies than fresh colostrum but it is far better than not enough or no colostrum, so make sure you have some in your calving kit.
- Taking time to draw colostrum off the cow/heifer is always the best option, provided you can do so safely. It can be frozen in zip seal bags.
- Consider the health and disease implications of taking in colostrum from another herd/farm.



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## Calving Problems

Dystocia (calving difficulty) is often caused by heavy birthweight. As the birthweight increases, so does the degree and intensity of dystocia, especially when heifers also have small pelvic openings.

### Uterine Prolapse

- Occurs after calving when the uterus inverts itself through the cervix and the vagina out of the cow.
- Larger in size than a vaginal prolapse, usually reaching all the way to the ground.
- In beef cattle, a prolonged delivery is the most common cause.
- **Requires immediate veterinary attention.** With the uterus out, tension is placed on the large uterine vessels. This tension on the vessels puts the cow at risk of rupturing, which can cause the animal to go into hypovolemic shock and bleed out internally.

## Calving Kit

Items that should be in the calving kit include; a broad spectrum antibiotic (check all medicines are in date prior to the start of the calving season), clean, soft calving ropes for the head and legs and a clean, working calving jack.



### Calving Ropes

- When placing knots on new ropes, always place them towards the ends to enable the loop to be opened wide enough to slide the ropes further up the legs if required during the calving.
- Attach leg ropes above the fetlock (wrist joint). They should be placed on the legs with no twists since this will damage the leg.
- A head rope can be invaluable. This should be placed around the back of the head below the ears and used by pulling on both ends. Never attach the head rope to a calving jack—one person pulling both ends of the rope is the maximum.



### Calving Jack

- If in doubt, get a neighbour or vet to help. Calving jacks exert 2-3 times more force than two people pulling and so inappropriate use can cause damage to cow and calf.
- Only pull when the cow pushes and rest when she rests.
- Use the jack as a lever rather than a crank to gently coax the calf out and down.

## Bull Selection For Calving

The targeted use of bulls with estimated breeding values (EBVs) for easy calving can help to reduce the risk of dystocia.

If you are breeding heifer replacements, it is also worth considering the maternal calving ease figures to give an indication of how easily a bull's daughters will calve.

EBV	What Does the EBV Indicate?	Look for...
<b>Calving Ease (%)</b>	Ease with which a bull's progeny will be born	<b>High positive EBVs</b> if you want less assisted calvings
<b>Maternal Calving Ease (%)</b>	Ease with which a bull's daughters will calve	<b>High positive EBVs</b> if you want less assisted calvings

### Calving and Carbon Footprint

Anywhere you can identify inefficiency in the life cycle of an animal will have an impact on the carbon emissions of your farm.

Calving at 24 versus 36 months can reduce your carbon footprint as the heifer is on farm for one year less before she starts production.

This reduces the resources required to feed and manage a cow to first calving, reduces the number of unproductive livestock on farm, and increases the number of calves a cow will have in her lifetime.



### Calving Age—Things to Think About

- Calving difficulty is essentially often a problem of first-calvers, irrespective of whether they calve at two or three years of age. Although three-year-olds are heavier and have larger pelvic openings than two-year-olds, they have proportionately heavier calves.
- A later calving age may be more appropriate in slower maturing breeds, such as Highland and other hill breeds.
- **Changing calving age is not an option for every business** - herd compositions (for example breed) are different and farms differ (environment, climate, land type, resources including labour availability, and how each suckler herd is managed).
- Two years of planning are required to change the calving age of the herd.

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## Bedding For Calving

Young and newly born calves spend the majority of their time lying down so it's important that they have a well bedded area to lie in.

It is important to ensure calving pens are well bedded with clean dry straw to allow calves to nest down in the straw, trapping a layer of warm air around themselves and allowing them to maintain their body temperature and keep warm.

Ensuring that calving pens and sheds are well bedded will also help to keep cow/heifer teats clean for calves sucking. Dirt or muck in the colostrum reduces absorption of critical antibodies in the colostrum.



Straw availability and prices have made farmers look to alternative bedding materials.

However there are several reasons to be cautious if your intention is to calves cows on alternative bedding, such as woodfines or sawdust.

### Things to Consider

- Woodfines/sawdust don't allow the calf to nest and they do not have the same thermal properties as straw.
- Calves have direct contact with dung/urine (this is likely to be a dried layer of muck on the surface with these materials) increasing risk of infection.
- Fine particle size and consistency of the material mean its likely the material will stick to the newly born calf which may affect the cow/heifer licking the calf and maternal bonding.
- Woodfines/sawdust can stick to teats which lead to calves ingesting dirty/muck material.

