



Calving: When to Call for Help



Christine B. Navarre, DVM

Why is it important?

Difficult birth is called dystocia. It occurs when labor is interrupted or prolonged and cannot be completed without external assistance.

Fetal-Pelvic Incompatibility (calf is too large) causes 90% of dystocias. The negative consequences of dystocias to both the cow/heifer and calf can be minimized with **appropriate** and early intervention.

Potential negative impacts of dystocia, particularly if mishandled:

- Calves have increased failure to ingest or absorb colostrum and increased sickness and death.
 - ◊ Calves that get sick or do not get colostrum have decreased production throughout their lifetimes.
- Cows can become paralyzed and/or have life threatening illness or death if the uterus, vagina or blood vessels are torn.
 - ◊ These are very rare complications in properly handled dystocias.
- Dystocia also negatively impacts breed-back. Handling dystocias appropriately minimizes this impact.

Producers should be familiar with the stages of labor and what to expect. Consider having a training session for farm personnel prior to each calving season. Your local veterinarian or the LSU AgCenter veterinarian can help with training.

Stage 1 of labor is when the uterus is contracting and the cervix is dilating. Some common signs are restlessness, pacing, standing up and down, isolation, tail wringing, and slight vaginal discharge. But some cattle will show no signs at all. This stage lasts from 2—6 hours.

Stage 2 of labor is when the cow has forceful contractions that should result in the birth of the calf. This stage lasts 1-2 hours.

What to do?

- Check cows/heifers at least twice per day during calving season.
 - ◊ If signs of Stage 1 are noted, but no calf is delivered within 6 hours, call the veterinarian.
 - ◊ In general, once Stage 2 is noted, cows should deliver a calf in 30 minutes and heifers in 1 hour.

What to do (continued)?

- If you don't see the start of labor to time correctly, then assume it has been going on too long and intervene according to the following:
 - ◊ If only the water bag is visible and no progress in 2 hours, call the veterinarian.
 - ◊ If feet are showing with soles down and no progress in 30 minutes, call the veterinarian.
 - ◊ If nose and feet out and no progress in 15 minutes, attempt to pull.
 - ◊ If feet are showing and soles are up, call veterinarian (they need to be in route as calf is likely compromised even if delivered by farm personnel).
 - Check for a backwards presentation vs. forward but upside down presentation.
 - ◊ Back legs – first and second joints bend in opposite directions.
 - ◊ Front legs – first and second joints bend in the same direction.
 - If calf is presenting back feet first, make sure tail stays tucked between the back legs and attempt to pull.
 - If upside down, wait for veterinarian.
- Call veterinarian any of the following are seen:
 - ◊ Only tail is visible.
 - ◊ Only head visible.
 - ◊ Only one leg visible up to knee with or without the head.
 - ◊ Two legs up to elbows without head.
 - ◊ Straining when nothing is showing.
 - ◊ Rest period between pushing longer than 15 minutes.
 - ◊ Only the placenta (afterbirth) is visible.
 - ◊ Calf with swollen tongue or yellow staining.
 - ◊ Cow/heifer is sick or weak, has a foul odor or discharge, or severe bleeding.
- Do not try to manipulate a mal-presentation or pull a calf unless head and feet are already out or calf is backwards.
 - ◊ It is better to have an experienced person examine and determine if the cervix is dilated, if there is still enough lubrication, and if the calf can be delivered vaginally or if a C-section is necessary.

If attempting to pull based on the previous rules:

- Proper placement of chains is a loop above the fetlock and a half hitch below the fetlock. This prevents cutting or breaking the legs.
- If attempting to pull and cow is down, then roll her onto her right side. This straightens the calf in the birth canal, making pulling easier.
- For front feet first presentation:
 - ◇ Pull straight out from the cow until the head is completely out. Then start to angle down slightly.
 - ◇ Pressure should be limited to one person per leg.
 - One person should pull one leg first.
 - If fetlock is one hand's breath out of the cow and knee at the vulva, then pull on second leg.
 - If second leg can be pulled even with the first and both fetlocks are one hand's breath out of the cow and knees are at the vulva, then check to make sure the head is also coming.
 - If head is coming and legs are out as described, continue to pull.
 - ◇ If both legs cannot be pulled out as described, call the veterinarian.
 - Pull legs one at a time in an alternating fashion, always making sure head is coming.
 - Pull with the contractions of the cow.
 - Once front end is out, allow the calf to take a few breaths before continuing to pull.
 - If hips lock when trying to deliver the back end, rotate the calf slightly to about 45 degrees and attempt to pull again.
- For backwards presentation:
 - ◇ Rotate calf to 45° angle.
 - ◇ Pull straight out or slightly up.
 - ◇ Pressure should be limited to one person per leg.
 - ◇ Pull both legs at the same time.
 - ◇ If hocks pass the vulva, keep pulling.
 - ◇ If hocks won't pass vulva with pressure of one person per leg, call veterinarian.
 - Calves delivered backwards have the umbilical cord clamped while the head is still in the cow and are at risk of inhaling fluid.
 - Careful consideration to determine if the calf can be delivered or not before starting is important to calf survivability.

Optional for experienced personnel:

- If feet are showing with soles down and no progress in 30 minutes:
 - ◇ Clean vulva, clean and lube hands and arms and examine for head and cervical dilation.
 - ◇ If head does not want to stay in the birth canal with the front legs, then the calf is likely too large to deliver without C-section or professional assistance. Call the veterinarian.
 - ◇ If cervix is not fully dilated and cow is still actively pushing, wait another 30 minutes. If no progress, call the veterinarian
 - ◇ If head is coming, a hand can fit between the top of the head and the vagina and the cervix is dilated, then attempt to pull.

Use of a mechanical calf puller (“calf jack”)?

A mechanical calf puller should not be necessary if two averaged sized people are available to pull the calf. However, a mechanical puller can be used to assist when working alone. ***It should not be used to forcefully deliver a calf that should be delivered by C-section.***

Authors

Christine B. Navarre, DVM, MS, DACVIM
School of Animal Sciences Louisiana State University Agricultural Center

Matt Welborn, DVM, MPH, DACVPM
Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine

Chance L. Armstrong ,DVM, MS, DACT
Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine

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