

Dystocia and Dairy Calf Survival

National survey information shows that nearly 20% of all dairy cattle require some form of assistance during the calving process. Dystocia (difficult birth) rates increase to almost 35% for all first calf dairy heifers. Despite such a high incidence of dystocia, little emphasis on management of dystocia and providing extra care to calves born with difficulty.

A recent national survey shows that on average 35% of all dairy calves will be ill and require treatment and 10.8% will die prior to 8 weeks at time of weaning. Most studies of dairy calf health focus on a wide variety of infectious diseases that account for these statistics. Although it has been well established in beef cattle that dystocia is the single most important factor in predisposing baby calves to disease and death, this relationship between dystocia and disease has not been adequately explored.

Last summer, ILM veterinary student Kevin McSweeney, funded by the GR Dodge Foundation, monitored calvings and tracked disease and death rates on two Colorado dairies, comparing calves born unassisted with calves from dystocia delivery. Nearly one-third (29.1%) of calves required delivery assistance. Of calves born with dystocia, 37.2% died, while only 15.9% of calves born without assistance died. Many of the extra death losses occurred as stillbirths or within the first day after delivery. It appeared that very good calf care was provided after birth, because there were not major differences in colostrum transfer or rates of disease treatments between the groups of calves.

These numbers represent very high rates of calf loss associated with delivery problems on Colorado dairies. Some of these losses cannot be avoided, because dystocia cannot be completely eliminated on any dairy. There are things you can do to decrease these rates of death loss.

1. Breed heifers to bulls who produce lower birth weight calves – ‘easy calving bulls’.
2. Watch heifers and dry cows carefully for signs of delivery problems and act promptly to assist the delivery. Waiting too long to assist an animal with delivery can compound the effects of dystocia on the cow and calf.
3. Make sure that personnel are well trained in appropriate techniques for assisting calf delivery and caring for the cow and calf after birth.
4. Provide an appropriate area for assisting delivery that is dry, spacious, and well protected. Poor facilities impede the efforts of both the people and the animals.

Past issues of the Colorado Dairy News have provided information on assessment of dystocia and assistance of calf delivery and newborn calf management (March 1998 issue), and colostrum management (March 1999 issue). If you need copies of this information please give us a call, or find it on our web site at www.cvmb.colostate.edu/ilm.