

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER



Calving and Colostrum

Colin Buchan BVM&S MRCVS

Spring suckler calving season is one of the most demanding times of the year on the farm but good preparation can support healthy cows and calves, ease workload and reduce stress.

Whilst there will always be calvings that are complicated and require a vet visit, and potentially surgical intervention, here are our top tips for getting the best outcomes from your calvings:

- 1 Keep your cows at an appropriate body condition score (2.5–3) as they approach calving. Over-conditioned cows have fat deposits within the pelvis, which leaves less room for the calf to pass through.
- 2 Ensure you have a good handling system in place. Keep calving cows close by, with a suitable handling system so that one person can easily get a cow in and restrained to examine and/or calve. A good setup means that cows are more likely to be examined promptly if calving is not progressing. Early detection of problems will give a much better chance of a good outcome for both cow and calf.
- 3 Hygiene. Keep calving areas well-bedded, as clean as possible and clean out frequently. Ensure calving ropes and aids are kept clean and disinfected between each calving. Maintaining good hygiene in the calving area reduces the risk of calf diseases, improving youngstock performance in the long term.
- 4 Give them enough time. Once cows enter second stage of labour (abdominal contractions, water bag bursts and calf born) calving can take 75 minutes, or up to 2 hours in heifers. If the calf is presented normally, allow the animal time to calve naturally. It takes time for the soft tissues around the birth canal to relax and stretch and pulling a calf out too quickly can lead to a torn cow as well as a calf that takes a long time to get up and going. Look for obvious progress each 30 minutes.
- 5 Put a head rope on! If you're faced with a calving that requires assistance to bring legs or head around, using a head rope ensures that you can control the head position as the calf comes up into the birth canal and makes assisting the birth much more straightforward.
- 6 If in doubt, call the vet. If you are unable to correct an abnormal presentation, or there is no progress within 30 minutes call for advice or assistance. The longer a cow is calving, the greater the risk of calf loss and post-calving complications.
- 7 Always check for a second calf. Twin pregnancies are more likely to require assistance at calving. The second calf may be further down in the uterus, so if the first calf is smaller than expected, recheck the cow after 30 minutes once the uterus has contracted further.

- 8 Give the cow plenty of fresh water and palatable food straight after calving. Cows can drink 3 or more large buckets within a few minutes of calving and providing easy access to this will ensure that she gets the best start to her lactation.
- 9 Give any cow that you have assisted pain relief. A comfortable cow will spend more time being mobile, eating and drinking. Also consider if antibiotics are required if there are large tears, or a dead calf.
- 10 Treat the navel. ASAP after birth treat the calf's navel using strong iodine or NoBacZ navel. Dipping is better than spraying as the product is wicked up the umbilical plan into start of the abdomen reducing the likelihood that bacteria enter the body systems.

Colostrum and the Newborn Calf

Adequate intakes of good quality colostrum within the first 24 hours is essential in ensuring the transfer of sufficient levels of passive immunity to the calf. The ability of the calf to absorb antibodies from colostrum declines rapidly after birth.

To assess colostrum in more detail, we use the 5 Qs:

QUANTITY Ensuring calves receive enough colostrum is key. Aim for 10% of body weight within the first 6 hours, ideally as soon as possible. This can be given via a tube or nipple drinker without affecting antibody absorption.

QUALITY Checking that the colostrum you're giving is good enough is important. This can be done easily using a Brix refractometer; here we aim for over 22%. Anti-scour vaccines can improve colostrum quality when given well before calving, making sure to follow manufacturer's guidelines. These vaccines will only be of benefit if the newborn calf receives adequate colostrum from its vaccinated mother.

QUICKLY As soon as the calf hits the floor the ability of the gut to allow antibodies to cross into the blood stream diminishes. At birth, 40% of available antibodies can be absorbed, but this drops to less than 5% by 24 hours.

QUIETLY Trying to tube calves when you're not used to it and the calf is struggling or the mum is agitated can be difficult. Ensuring you stay calm and are prepared will help, as does lots of practice. Choose a tube you're comfortable with, ensure it's easy to clean, and replace it regularly.



sQueaky CLEAN Ensuring we are not feeding this vulnerable baby a "bacteria soup" is important. Bacteria thrive in colostrum, doubling every 20 minutes at room temperature. When harvesting colostrum, clean the udder and bucket, and especially the storage container. Storage containers should be lidded and refrigerated (use within 3 days) or frozen (up to 6 months). Label frozen colostrum with the cow number, date, and Brix result, and freeze in small portions to speed up thawing. Avoid overheating or microwaving frozen colostrum, as this destroys antibodies.

Calving is physically demanding, so ensure reliable help is available when needed. Having extra support can reduce stress and ensures the cow will receive timely assistance during a difficult calving. Accurate record-keeping during the calving season can help identify issues early on. This information can be useful if veterinary assistance is required later.

The Sustainable Farming Grant was originally due to end this month, but it is back again for this year! Activities performed during 2025 will continue to be funded and claims will be accepted up until the end of February 2026! Farmers in Scotland can claim up to £500 per year for two interventions.

ATTENTION PLEASE



For more information, please contact one of our farm vets or visit www.ruralpayments.org under Preparing for Sustainable Farming.