

The Good Calving Guide



Calving Kit

Essential kit should include obstetric gloves, clean calving ropes for head and legs, obstetric gel, surgical scrub, a clean calving gown, a broad spectrum antibiotic and an NSAID (painkiller and anti-inflammatory).

Calving Pens

Dedicated calving pens are essential. The pens should be light, airy and well bedded; with electric lighting, water, concrete floors and walls which can be cleaned and disinfected between calvings, secure gates, and secure points where the cow can be safely haltered.

Calving should never be attempted in a conventional crush. If a yoke is used it must have a quick release and be open to ground level, to avoid a choking risk should the animal go down. Caesarean restraints are now widely available and are recommended if caesareans are routinely performed.

Decision Making

The majority of calving problems are due to an imbalance between the size of the calf and the cow. Reasons include improper bull selection, unplanned pregnancy (e.g. young heifers served by bull calves) or the anatomy of the cow (e.g. narrow pelvis). Often these calvings are normally presented but the cow fails to progress unaided. It is unlikely that the calf will be safely delivered by traction if

- The calf's head fails to pass through the cervix into the vagina before traction is applied.
- The calf's feet are unable to present side by side i.e. they are crossed over.

In these situations, call for veterinary assistance.

Applying Traction

If traction is to be used, then ropes should be placed on both legs. A head rope may also help and should be applied over the calf's ears. This rope should not be attached to the jack, but handed to an assistant who guides the head into the vagina by steady pulling. Generous amounts of obstetric gel should be used and firm, steady pressure should be applied. If the calf fails to progress then traction should be abandoned and a caesarean section performed.

Correction of Malpresentations

Anterior malpresentations include head back, one or both feet back, or head presented and both feet back. To correct these, gently push the calf back into the uterus and correct the malpresentation, taking care to cup a hand over the feet to prevent tearing of the uterus. If the head is presented, place a head rope before pushing the calf back.

Posterior presentations include both back legs presented in the vagina or breech presentation when one or both legs are extended forward into the uterus. To correct a breech presentation push the calf's hips back into the uterus and attach a rope around the leg. Push the calf's hock forward whilst pulling the rope to draw the leg towards the cervix.

Care must be taken to avoid tearing the uterus. Once both back legs are presented in the vagina traction can be applied. If the calf's hips are too large and no progress is made with steady traction a caesarean will be required.

Twins

At first inspection it can be very confusing to identify how twins are lying. Follow each leg towards the body or head of the calf and identify which limb belongs to which calf. Then place ropes on both legs and the head before applying traction.

Due to the smaller size of twins, little force should be needed to extract the calves. If the calving is failing to progress then traction should cease and the ropes should be re-assessed to ensure they are all attached to the same calf.

Always check for a second calf even if the first-born calf is large. It is not uncommon for a second calf to go unnoticed until a few days post calving when the cow becomes ill.

Torsion (Twisting) of the Uterus

Uterine torsions occur when the uterus twists, most often in an anti-clockwise direction, so that the vagina feels tight and coiled and it may only be just possible to reach a limb or the head. Torsions can be corrected by pushing the calf in the opposite direction to the twist; however they will often require veterinary assistance.

Incomplete Dilatation of the Cervix

If the cervix fails to dilate fully, it can be felt as a firm ring-like structure. If this is identified, traction must not be attempted as the cervix will tear. The cow should be re-checked in one to two hours and if the cervix has failed to dilate veterinary attention should be sought.

Call us for more information

Routine opening hours
Mon - Fri 8.30am - 6.00pm
Sat 8.30am - 12.00 noon

24hr Emergency Services
Tel: 01746 713 911



Downer Ewes

Down ewes can be frustrating and time consuming – the most common causes are metabolic and related to nutrition around lambing time. Treatment in all cases is much more likely to be successful if instigated as early as possible so accurate identification and diagnosis of downer ewes is key.

Twin Lamb

Twin lamb or pregnancy toxaemia is most common in older ewes carrying multiple lambs. It is caused by the ewe taking in insufficient amounts of energy during late pregnancy; she ends up using her body fats as an energy source which creates toxic by-products.

Signs include:

- Isolating herself from the rest of the flock
- Going off feed
- Lethargy and depression
- Apparent blindness and star gazing
- Tremors/weakness/recumbency
- Death

Treatment should include drenching with propylene glycol or another energy source such as “Ewe-Go”, administration of sub-cut calcium and importantly a NSAID injection. If signs are severe IV glucose or aborting the lambs may be required – contact the surgery ASAP in severely affected cases.

Prevention involves ensuring adequate ewe nutrition – body condition scoring, feeding according to expected lamb number, ensuring sufficient trough space, good quality forages and avoiding rapid diet changes.

Hypocalcaemia

Unlike cattle this is more likely to occur during late pregnancy in ewes though is possible in early lactation. Again older ewes are more at risk as their ability to metabolise calcium appropriately is reduced. Carrying multiple foetuses and twin lamb disease also increases the likelihood. It can also be triggered by stressful events such as moving/housing or a change in diet.

Signs include:

- Depression/weakness/recumbency as with twin lamb but will progress differently...
- Rumen stasis and bloat, regurgitation – green fluid running from the nose/mouth
- Coma and death within 24-48 hours

Treatment involves give 60-80ml WARMED calcium borogluconate sub-cut over several sites (the response to IV calcium is much more rapid but needs to be done carefully and should be carried out by a vet only). Oral calcium supplements such as “Ewe-Go” should again be considered.

Often twin lamb and hypocalcaemia can be hard to distinguish so in these circumstances treat for both conditions.

Hypomagnesaemia

Staggers is very similar in sheep to the disease in cattle and commonly occurs in conjunction with hypocalcaemia. It typically occurs later on in the production cycle affecting lactating ewes out at grass. Ruminants have no body stores of magnesium so need to ingest sufficient amounts every day. Signs include in-coordination, tremors, recumbency and fitting. Treatment involves giving up to 75ml magnesium sulphate by sub-cut injection as soon as signs are seen – rapid treatment is key.



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