

ZERO calf sickness is absolutely possible

Zero sick cattle in a cow-calf business may seem like a lofty goal, but it should not be. We work with many A+ managers who achieve this goal year after year.

Calf health begins at conception, where dam nutrition is of utmost importance. Shorting the cow nutritionally during any of the 283 days of gestation could negatively impact the developing fetus and make it more susceptible to disease after birth. The next critical time for the calf is at birth. A female in excellent body condition score (6.5 to 7 for heifers and 5.5 to 6 for cows) should deliver a calf quickly and without assistance.

Calves from heifers should be born within 60 minutes of the appearance of the water sac, and the calf should be standing 30 minutes later and nursing 30 minutes after standing.

An adult cow should deliver her calf more quickly than a heifer (30 minutes) with the calf standing and nursing in the same time frame as in heifers. If this is not the case, dystocia or low calf vigor may be the issue.

If it's dystocia in heifers, use a calving ease sire (high CED EPD) from a calving ease breed on your heifers. If vigor is a problem, genetics are likely the reason. Crossbreeding with a different breed or composite will add heterosis and should solve the problem.

Why is vigor important? Colostrum consumption is greater in calves that are born with more vigor. Improved intake of colostrum equals healthier calves.

The most critical factor in neonatal calf health is the calving environment. Use the Sandhills Calving System (SCS) so that calves are born into a "clean" environment. In SCS, pairs stay where the calf was born, and cows yet to calve are moved to a new "clean" pasture. "Clean" means no cattle were there for the previous few months.

This system is opposite of the traditional "calve all cows in a calving lot and move pairs to a 'clean' lot or pasture."

This older method is a great recipe for contaminating the area with disease organisms and almost ensuring all calves born in the second half of the calving season will get sick. Start with the herd in the calving pasture, and those that calve there stay there. Those yet to calve go to the new clean pasture so those calves are born in a clean environment.

Additional environmental keys are:

Calve outside

- in weather that promotes calf health.

Calve heifers separately from cows.

- Cows and calves should not have access to a barn.

Having a calf-only shelter is fine; having cows with free access to a barn equals wet, manure-covered cows and sick calves.

Never bring in new animals during the calving season. I've seen disasters when this happens. Purchasing a calf to graft onto a cow that loses hers is a great way to "buy" a new disease.

Vaccines are another tool to prevent disease, and your herd health veterinarian is the expert to recommend what to use and when. Ask for advice before changing your program.

Attaining zero sickness is absolutely possible. It takes a systematic plan and is well worth the effort.

Acknowledgement: W. Mark Hilton in Vet's Opinion | RSS Feb 18, 2016

