



Difficult Calvings

– What is the Cost?

Calving difficulty is predominantly a problem of heifers with up to 25% of heifers requiring assistance in some herds. Calving problems are less frequent in cows but are still estimated to be 1-5% of all births.

What Is This Problem?

Calving difficulty can cost you money in many ways, some of which might not be obvious but are the long term costs of a difficult birth process on the cow and/or calf:

- Time and labour issues with assisting deliveries.
- Increased mortality of calves – up to half of all calf deaths occur because of a difficult calving.
- Low vigour in surviving calves – calves that survive a difficult birth take longer to stand, longer to reach the udder and suckling can be delayed.
- Hypothermia in surviving calves – calves that have had a difficult delivery and been without oxygen during the birth can have a reduced ability to maintain their body temperature after birth. These calves are vulnerable to low temperatures and can die from hypothermia.
- Particularly in heifers, a difficult birth may disrupt the onset of maternal behaviour so that the calf may not be mothered up properly.
- A difficult calving increases the chance of other reproductive problems – a cow is more likely to suffer from mastitis, not cleansing, etc. after calving problems. She may also have lower milk yield (affecting calf growth), and may take longer or be more difficult to get back in calf.

- Cows are more likely to be culled if they have a difficult calving.

Why Does It Happen?

The risk factors for calving problems are:

- Experience, heifers are 5-12 times more likely to need assistance than cows.
- Calf Birth weight and particularly the ratio of calf weight to cow weight.
- Dam pelvic area (the dam's size and age).
- Sex of the calf – bull calves are more likely to need help than heifer calves.
- Breed and sire within breed – some breeds are more likely to cause problems at calving than others (generally more problems with Continental breeds), also particular bulls have more birth difficulty than others.

What Can You Do To Reduce Calving Difficulty?

As calving difficulty is especially an issue for heifer calvings paying particular attention to management and choice of sire used to mate heifers will pay dividends in reducing problems. Optimal calf to cow weight at birth is for calves weighing between 6-8% of the cow weight. Lighter calves are more likely to be weak, low vigour calves; heavier calves are likely to have calving difficulty. So management of animals to prevent excessive weight gain in pregnancy will help to prevent calving problems and calf mortality. Breed selection and particularly selection of bulls with EBVs for Calving Ease, especially for heifers, will also reduce calving problems.

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