

CALVING EASE

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IMPROVING HEIFER HANDLING (PART 2)

General Rules of Bovine Behavior (continued)

8. Bovines are herd animals. They don't like to be separated from their herd mates.
9. Groups of heifers that have body contact remain calmer.
10. Unexpected loud or novel noises can be highly stressful to bovines.
11. Bovines readily adapt to reasonable levels of continuous sound such as white noise or music.
12. Bovines exposed to a variety of sounds (radio with talk and music) may have a reduced reaction to sudden noises.
13. Calves and heifers readily adapt to handling even if the events may be stressful initially (going into scales, going through a chute, being locked into headlocks, transporting).
14. Heifers can be trained to voluntarily accept restraint with relatively low levels of stress.
15. A small amount of inconsistency in care and handling may reduce calves' stress response to new sights and sounds.
16. Consistent poor handling of heifers can create chronic stress.

Applications for Moving Heifers

Heifers like to stay together. A heifer separated from her herdmates gets very anxious. Her flight zone increases dramatically. This needs to be considered when building or remodeling facilities. When only group pens are available lots of workers are required to isolate and drive individual animals away from the group. When a sorting chute and pen are available the heifers are mechanically isolated and released one at a time into the appropriate group with a minimum of labor. Equally notable, with good sorting facilities the heifers are only minimally stressed by sorting. That means fewer sick heifers. That means fewer fear memories impressed on heifers that result in larger flight zones as adult cows (1).

Just a side note about chutes. When heifers cannot see very far past the front of a squeeze chute (no more than about four feet), they are less likely to charge the headlock. Any kind of solid surface that blocks sight will work – even a temporary screen. Avoiding the violent “Charge! Slam!” entry can reduce bruising and injuries.

Applications for Noise

Everyone working with heifers has seen them spook. Often we say, “I wonder what spooked them. I didn’t hear anything.” Remember that their hearing is different than ours. Our hearing goes up to around 3000 Hz. Their hearing goes well up into the range of 4000-8000 Hz.

One way to deal with unexpected noises in and around heifer facilities is to provide reasonable levels of nearly continuous sound. Heifers housed near operations involving loaders and large trucks are more likely to have reduced reactions to loud noises. In contrast, heifers reared in an isolated location are more likely to spook in response to loud noises. Providing a radio tuned to a commercial station with both talk and music is one way to accomplish this adaptive response in heifers.

Applications for Training

“An animal’s stress reaction to a handling procedure such as transport or restraint depends on three factors: genetics, individual differences and previous experiences.” (2)

Consistent regular gentle handling of calves and heifers can reduce stress. Recent research reported teaching heifers to adapt to being restrained in a squeeze chute. After only eight times through the chute over a number of days the heifers were more willing to enter the chute without urging. Also, they were more likely to remain calm and stand still while restrained. They can learn and adapt even to an event that is initially stressful. We are reminded that gentle and quiet handling was maintained throughout the research (3).

In contrast to these observations we also know that repetitive rough and loud handling of heifers can cause acute chronic stress. Chronically stressed calves and heifers have depressed immune systems. Compared to non-stressed animals they are more likely to require treatment for disease, especially respiratory illness.

Calf Raisers’ Tip

How about permission to be less than perfect? Sounds just a little sinful. But animal behavior scientists tell us that a small amount of inconsistency in care and handling of calves can be beneficial! It reduces their novelty stress responses. That could mean healthier calves. So, go out and be just a little inconsistent and feel sinful!

References: (1) Roenfeldt, Shirley “3areas where you can improve animal handling” in Dairy Herd Management 38:9 (September 01) pp.38-41. (2) Grandin, Temple “Adapting bovine behavior to improve performance” available at web site www.afns.ualberta.ca/wcds/wcd97/ch29-97.htm . (3) Littlefield, V., T. Grandin, J.L. Lanier “Quiet handling of heifers reduces aversion to restraint” J. Anim. Sci. Vol. 79, Suppl. 1, p. 277.

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