

# CALVING EASE

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Editors

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## NEWBORN POOPS

This certainly is not an elegant topic for any newsletter, even one devoted to raising bovine heifer calves. Experienced calf raisers already know this stuff. But, persons new to calf care are not necessarily familiar with the topic. So, keep this issue handy to acquaint new workers with the mysteries of newborn poops!

### **Come Quickly! The Calf is Dying!**

First thing in the morning a new worker rushes up to you saying, "Come quickly. The calf you sent me to feed is dying." The two of you go to look at the calf. Sure enough. The calf gives every appearance of terminal illness. She is out flat on her side. Can't lift her head. Bad case of what some of us call "spaghetti legs;" that is, her legs just buckle under her if you try to get her standing. Labored breathing. May seem to be straining just to stay alive. Won't suck on a nipple or even your finger. Rather sudden onset of illness, too. She ate eagerly at the prior evening feeding.

On one hand, if this calf is a week old or older this would be a case for urgent action. On the other hand, if this calf is twenty-four to forty-eight hours old maybe it's time to check her pen or hutch for fresh feces. If no feces, perhaps the "disease" is no more than newborn constipation.

### **Caution**

This light-handed treatment of a case of newborn constipation should not distract us from other potential causes of a down calf. Each farm situation is different. If high pathogen exposure of newborns has been a problem, other causes of this apparent illness ought to be considered. Or, if consistency of navel dipping has been a problem another avenue should be examined.

If in fact some of these down newborns die, you need to work with your veterinarian to determine the probable causes and potential solutions. If, however, they all seem to rise from their death bed to eat at the next feeding, newborn poops may be the answer.

### **Dying versus eliminating?**

You may recall being told at one point or another about fetuses accumulating waste products while in the dam. Some amount of waste does collect in the calf's intestines before it is born. Then, shortly after birth, we feed colostrum. Often a second feeding follows at eight to twelve hours later. This means that by thirty-six hours after birth we probably have fed at least six quarts of colostrum. The calf has eaten what amounts to about three pounds of dry matter. These three

pounds of dry matter are not all absorbed. There are waste products. Some are excreted through the urine. Others make their way out as feces.

But, what if the waste that accumulated prior to birth doesn't move very easily when the calf needs to pass feces? Discomfort! Urgent need to eliminate!

What happens when the "log-jam" gives way? Frequently the volume passed at this point may be quite impressive given the small size of the calf. A puddle of poop in diameter exceeding the span of an adult's hand is common. A mixture of solid and semi-solid waste products is common as well.

While not the case in every calf, we find this first puddle of feces often characterized in part by unusual colors such as black and green rather than the "normal" yellow/orange.

### Now, back to the "dying" calf.

You turn to your new calf care worker and ask, "How old is she?" They say, "Born yesterday." You direct a search for this puddle of feces that will prove she has had the important first poop. Nothing can be found. On this occasion you announce sagely, "She's okay. She just has the newborn poops. Don't try to feed her now. Just wait until this afternoon. She will be up and ready to eat."

Sure enough. At the afternoon feeding the "dying" calf is up and active. In her pen/hutch is the big puddle of off-color feces we expected to see. When offered food she eats aggressively. And, the new calf care worker now knows what to look for when confronted with a day-old "dying" calf.

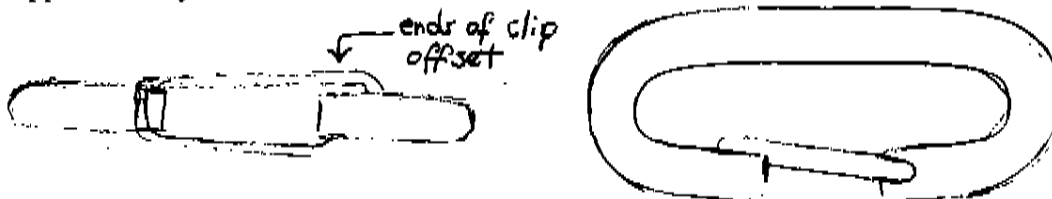
How many calves should we expect to show these symptoms? Our experience suggests about thirty to forty percent will experience difficulty passing feces the first time.

Just one last word of caution. If there is a history of neonatal deaths due to disease on your dairy always work closely with your veterinarian to set up a diagnostic routine for unresponsive calves. Only in the absence of this disease history can we feel comfortable saying, "It's just the newborn poops."

### Calf Feeder's Tip

Everyone needs to clip things to calf pens and hutch fences. But, have you priced snaps lately? Two to four dollars for a simple, small snap. And many of the snaps are not that easy to open when you have gloves on or your hands are wet.

Solution? The breeching snap shown in the sketch below. They are relatively inexpensive. When the wire clip gets bent you just bend it back into shape. They open easily even with wet hands. Sketch approximately actual size.



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