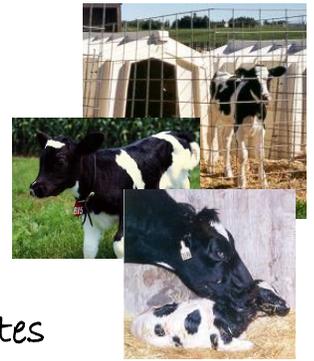


Calving Ease

October 2017

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Caring for Calves Can Be Painful

I do not use “pain” here in the sense when we say, “That calf is a pain.” Rather, “pain” or “painful” refers to physical discomfort. My focus in this issue is on you, the caregiver, not the calf.

On one hand, everyone that has cared for calves has been bumped and bruised. For example, the few times I have leaned over too close to a calf when bottle feeding have not been pleasant. What happens when a calf abruptly brings up her hard head and your face is in the way? Ouch! Add the inevitable kicks and jumps for a bruise or two.

Chronic pain

In contrast, on the other hand, disabling pain is much more often chronic pain than bruises. Joint and back pains are experienced by nearly all calf caregivers. We all hurt, one place or another. And, the hurting diminishes our quality of life.

Why is this kind of pain so common and is there anything we can do to reduce it?

Think about your daily calf care routine. How heavy are the things that you lift? In relationship to your body, where are these things? How often do you walk carrying something? How many times do you repeat the same carrying or lifting task? How often do you perform tasks while in a bending position?

Sources of stress

Think about your daily routine. Here are some sources of stress that can affect you:

1. Lifting objects from the floor in front of you, especially with your back bowed out. For example, picking up a newborn calf (90+ pounds). Lifting a bag of milk replacer or calf starter grain (50 pounds).
2. Lifting excessively heavy objects. For example, picking up a BIG newborn calf (100+ pounds) or loading a fifteen-gallon barrel of chemicals (130-150 pounds) into the back of a pickup.
3. Turning or twisting while lifting, especially jerking up and twisting at the same time. For example, quickly lifting a five-gallon pail of milk (45 pounds) into a cart or on to the tailgate of a truck without moving your feet.
4. Repeating the same motion many times. For example, dumping water from calf pails, scooping milk replacer into calf pails, feeding milk bottles or starter grain.
5. Bending forward to touch or reach something, especially bending and reaching at the same time. For example, dipping a navel, washing feeding equipment, teaching a calf to drink from a bucket.

6. Restraining a calf without the benefit of a halter, headlock or corner of a pen. Examples: while using an esophageal feeder; while injecting vaccines or medication; while moving weaned calves.

Can we reduce chronic back pain?

Experts in physical therapy and occupational medicine suggest five points for reducing back pain. They are: (1) Posture, (2) Rest, (3) Body Mechanics, (4) Lifting, and (5) Exercise.

Lifting

In a short booklet entitled, Back Facts, Dr. Kevin Ward notes, “When you allow your lower back to bow out [when lifting something from below our knees], the muscles, ligaments, and the back of the disc can be injured by stretching, and the disc pressures are higher, making the risk greater. When you bow in your lower back [while lifting], all of the bones, muscles, ligaments and discs are held in their normal position. This is the best method of decreasing stress on your back during all of your activities.”

Can we reduce chronic elbow and shoulder pain?

During an interview with physical therapist Dr. Michelle Owczarczak I was reminded about four important points for reducing chronic elbow and shoulder pain. They are: (1) Limiting load weights, (2) Carrying loads as close as possible to the body, (3) Limiting repetitions, and (4) Limiting range of reach.

Practical calf care examples we identified in our conversation were:

- Use smaller containers or scoops to reduce loads. For example, use a three-gallon pail rather than a five-gallon one. Wait and get help with very heavy loads.
- Rearrange equipment or pens to reduce how far you are reaching to do a job. For example, raise the sink or cart in which you wash equipment to reduce the amount of bending while cleaning up after feeding.
- Take turns on jobs with another calf care person rather than doing the same job every feeding or every day. Or, if you are the only calf care person, arrange the timing of jobs so that the same repetitive motions are spread out rather than concentrated at one time.
- Adopt the practice of stretching at least 2 or 3 times a day. For example, arch back and hold this position to relieve tightness in your back. Or with your arms in front turning the palms out and hold for 5 to 10 seconds to stretch the elbows.

Summary

Calf care is a very physical job. On one hand, it is inevitable that we will be knocked around now and then. However, usually we quickly get over bumps and bruises. On the other hand, most of us are at high risk for chronic pain in our backs, elbows and shoulders. Given thoughtful planning and persistent commitment, we can reduce this pain level and improve our quality of life.

References: Ward, Kevin Back Facts Step-by-Step Physical Therapy. Warsaw NY no date. Dr. Michelle Owczarczak, personal communication, September 2017.

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