

CALVING EASE

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Calf Care and Pain

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

Everyone that has cared for calves has been bumped and bruised. The few times I have leaned over too close to a calf when bottle feeding have not been nice. 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

However, disabling pain is much more often chronic pain. Joint and back pains are endemic among 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 routine. How large 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

Having thought about your daily routine, can you identify any of these sources of stress that 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 or a bag of feed. (For a diagram of a “bowed-out” back, go to www.atticacows.com, click on Calf Facts, scroll to Back Posture for Lifting.)
2. Lifting excessively heavy objects. For example, picking up a BIG newborn calf or loading a fifteen-gallon barrel of chemicals into the back of a pickup.
3. Turning or twisting while lifting, especially jerking and twisting at the same time. For example, quickly lifting a five-gallon pail (43 pounds) of milk into a cart 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 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. For example,

while using an esophageal feeder, while injecting vaccines or medication, while moving weaned calves.

If you could see yourself in nearly all of these situations, you are at risk for chronic joint and back pain.

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. The two areas most neglected by calf caregivers are lifting and exercise. Few of us have any instruction in either of these areas beyond “folk” knowledge such as “Bend your knees when lifting from the floor.”

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.” (See Back Posture for Lifting in Calf Facts at www.atticacows.com .)

Can we reduce chronic elbow and shoulder pain?

During an interview with Dr. Patricia Mann I learned about three important points for reducing chronic elbow and shoulder pain. They are: (1) Limiting loads, (2) Limiting repetitions, and (3) Limiting range of reach.

Practical calf care examples we identified in our conversation were:

- Using smaller containers or scoops to reduce loads. For example, use a three-gallon pail rather than a five-gallon one.
- 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.
- 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.

Summary

Calf care is a very physical job. It is inevitable that we will be knocked around now and then. However, we get over bumps and bruises. In addition, most of us suffer from 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. Patricia Mann, personal communication, August 2005.

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