



## CALVING

**AIM: TO PROVIDE FARMERS WITH INFORMATION TO ENSURE WELFARE OF COWS AND CALVES AT CALVING TIME**

### When will my cow calve?

- Cows are pregnant for approximately 283 days (10 months). Use the *Calving Calculator (R02B)* to estimate when your cow should calve.
- Signs a cow is approaching calving are:
  - Swelling of udder (can happen up to 1 month before calving).
  - Milk dripping from teats.
  - Mucus string from vulva.
  - Restlessness.
- When your cow is close to calving, inspect her frequently. Ideally **at least every 6 hours**, or more frequently if necessary.

### What should I do to prepare for calving?

- Bring the cow **close to the farm** so you can easily check on her.
- Make sure she has a clean, dry and quiet place to calve. It should be **sheltered** from sun, wind and rain.
- Prepare your **well ventilated** calf pen.
- Have the number of the local veterinary officer or other animal health professional easily accessible in case of need.

### What will happen when my cow calves?

- Calving will progress at different rates for different cows. Generally calving happens in two stages; preparation for calving and delivery.

### Stage One - Preparation for calving:

The cow shows the following signs:

- Moves away from herd and has reduced appetite.
- Pelvic ligaments relaxed - vulva looks swollen and flabby.
- Dip between tailhead and pin-bones (*see photos*).
- Abdomen less full as calf moves into birth canal/birthing position.
- Mothering other cows' calves.
- Discomfort – swishing tail, arched back, restless, urinating, kicking and nosing at her side, tail raising.
- Straining/contractions.
- Water bag protruding.



Photos showing changes around the tail head and pin bones both before and after calving.

<https://spiritedrose.wordpress.com/jersey-cattle/medicine-box/how-close-to-calving-photos/>



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Arched back



Restless



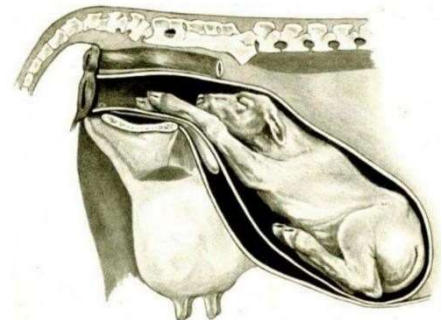
Kicking and nosing at her side

### Stage Two - Delivery:

- **Cows** should calve in 30 minutes to 1 hour. No more than 2 hours.
- **Heifers** should take 2 to 3 hours to calve. No more than 4 hours.
- During a normal birth, the following process occurs:
  1. Cow starts straining and pushing. Two feet seen in the water sack.
  2. Once feet are 10cm clear of the vulva the head is through the pelvis. The umbilical cord is still attached. The cow is still providing oxygen to the calf.
  3. Once the head has cleared the pelvis, the cow may rest for a minute or two. Once the calf's shoulders have cleared the pelvis, birth will continue fairly quickly. The umbilical cord should have broken by this point and the calf will start to breathe on its own.

### Normal presentation for calving<sup>1</sup>

- **Head first.** The calf's two front feet and head create a wedge which help open the birth canal to let the calf to pass through.
- Feet and nose entering the birthing canal is one trigger that causes the cow to start straining. If a calf is presented in other ways, the cow may not go into full labour.



### Abnormal presentation / helping the cow to calve

- Any other positioning of the calf in the birth canal. This may be tail first, leg back, head back or calf upside down.
- A calf which is abnormally presented is likely to need help calving.
- Even if a calf is in the right position, assistance may be needed if the calf is too big for the cow.
- If you are unsure how to correct an abnormal presentation call an experienced person or veterinary officer for help.

<sup>1</sup> <https://hansendairy.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/normal.jpg>



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### What happens to the cow after the birth?

- 1. Cleaning the calf:** The cow will stand, sniff and start to lick the newborn calf. Licking helps dry the calf, stimulate blood flow and prevent the calf from getting too cold.
- 2. Expulsion of placenta** within 6 hours of birth. The uterus begins to shrink back to normal size. Cows usually eat some or all of the placenta.
  - Make sure you know what an entire placenta looks like.

**!! If only a small part of the placenta comes away, record this and let your vet know.**

### How do I know if my cow has calved?

- Hollow looking or slab sided.
- Appetite returned.
- Red, stretched/floppy vulva, might be bruised or torn.
- Blood/mucus in tail/udder/hocks.
- Dirty flanks if in a muddy paddock.
- Teats clean/suckled by calf.
- Has a calf with her, or is looking for a calf or murmuring to a calf.
- Afterbirth may be hanging out of the vulva or has already been ejected – the cow may be eating it!

### Checking and caring for the calf

- If calves are not breathing, attempt to resuscitate immediately by:
  - Clearing the airways.
  - Vigorously rubbing the calf's flank.
  - Tickling the nostril with straw/grass to stimulate sneeze.
  - Pouring a bucket of cold water over the head to stimulate a gasp.
  - Performing mouth to mouth/nose resuscitation.
- **Spray / dip the navel completely with iodine.** This protects the calf from getting infections which can enter through the navel.  
**!! DO NOT** use teat dip.
- Let the calf drink **colostrum** as soon after birth as possible. *See separate fact sheets on calf feeding and calf care.*
- Record the birth (*see next page*). Calving records should include:
  - Date.
  - Cow (dam) tag number or name (cow ID).
  - Sex of the calf and calf identification details.
  - Calf alive or dead. Assisted or unassisted calving.

ZDTP is focused on supporting dairy farmers to improve their productivity, milk quality and linkages to urban markets. The views expressed in this publication are those of the implementers of the programme and do not necessarily reflect those of the New Zealand Government. For further information, please contact ZDTP on [zdtpinfo@primeconsultants.net](mailto:zdtpinfo@primeconsultants.net). Follow us on [www.zambiadairy.com](http://www.zambiadairy.com), Facebook ([facebook.com/zambiadairy/](https://facebook.com/zambiadairy/)) and Twitter (@DairyZambia).



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**Calving Record Sheet**

Date of calving	Cow (dam) ID	Sire (Bull) Breed / ID	Sex of calf	Calf ID	Calf dead / alive	Comments, including calf assisted / unassisted