

XLVets is a novel and exciting initiative, conceived from within the veterinary profession aimed at supporting UK agriculture as it faces challenges in the 21st century.

We are a group of farm animal committed veterinary practices, and as such our policy is to work together, alongside commercial research and manufacturing companies, to share best practice on advice and disease prevention initiatives so providing the first point of call on health management and consultancy advice and facing up to the plethora of current on-farm consultancy advice other than from the veterinary surgeon. We are interested in the development and creation of markets for the economic advantage and support of our clients' long term future and prosperity.

The aim of the group is to put veterinary surgeons at the heart of their clients' farming enterprises, offering independent and high quality advice alongside other specialist advisers. We are dedicated to the survival and growth of the livestock farming industry and wish to work with like-minded, committed professionals.

We are constantly seeking cost-effective preventative medicines and consumables and looking to advise on best practice.



For further information, please contact your local XLVets Practice.

www.xlvets.co.uk

Committed to UK Farming
EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE



Our primary aims are 4 fold:

1. To be a primary source of on-farm advice and the central co-ordinating consultant for other farm services for our clients.
2. To be committed to the sharing of current best practice advice to our clients through direct XLVets newsletters and client training, associated with our own high levels of Continuing Professional Development (CPD).
3. To be highly competitive in the health and medicines market with not only Prescription Only Medicines (POMs) but also re-establishing the vet as a primary source for on-farm Pharmacy and Merchants List (PML) and other medicinal and consumable products supported by impartial professional advice.
4. To improve our own efficiencies and reduce our costs by economies of scale over a wide range of practice needs and requirements.



FACT SHEET 09

MINIMISING CALVING DIFFICULTIES

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MINIMISING CALVING difficulties

Calving difficulties (dystocia) contribute heavily to production losses in suckler herds. The obvious losses are due to calves or cows that die at, or soon after, calving. Studies from the USA have shown that calves which experience difficult births are four times more likely to be born dead or die within the first 24 hours of birth compared to those born without difficulty.

Less noticeable losses that are due to calving difficulties include delayed return to heat, poorer conception rates and subsequent higher barren rates and extended calving patterns. Labour, vet and medicine costs also escalate the more problems you have. While occasional calving problems are almost unavoidable, minimising dystocia by careful management and selection of genetics will obviously improve calf survival rates and the profitability of your herd.

Many factors influence the incidence of dystocia, but broadly they can be split into two groups.

Factors affecting calf size and shape

1. Calf birth weight
2. Breed and genetics of sire
3. Position and presentation in the uterus

Factors affecting the ability of the cow to give birth

1. Cow's pelvic area
2. Age and breed of cow
3. Nutrition and condition

Genetics - Estimated Breeding Values

The heritability of calving ease is fairly low so genetic solutions are not straightforward. It is also influenced by management, feeding and season of calving, hence it can be hard to predict in an individual animal.

However, calving ease can be improved by comparing information from different sources, including the animal's own records for calving ease, its contemporaries in the same herd, those of relatives in other herds and also the animal's and relatives' genetic merit for other recorded traits (e.g. birth weights, 200 day weight, 400 day weight, gestation length, muscle score and muscle depth). This will improve the accuracy of the animal's calving ease EBV and birth weight EBV which can then be used as tools in reducing the incidence of dystocia along with other physical performance traits to maximise the productivity of your herd.

Recommendations for reducing dystocia

1. Mate bulling heifers and small cows to bulls that will sire small calves.
2. Consider the breed, estimated birth weight variation, actual birth weight, calving ease and physical structure of the bull.
3. Aim to calve heifers down at 85% of their expected mature weight.
4. Monitor body condition score and target spring calving cows to be in BCS 2-2.5 at calving, autumn calving cows to be in BCS 3.

5. Do not try to limit feed prior to calving. It will reduce birth weights, but as it will limit cow nutrition it can actually increase calving problems as underfed cows will struggle to progress through a normal calving despite having a lighter calf. Also, underfed cows will take longer to return to heat so this practice is not recommended.
6. Consider measuring pelvic area in replacement heifers and culling those that are too small if your herd has had problems. Target pelvic area sizes will vary from one breed to the next. As a rule of thumb heifers of medium sized breeds should have pelvises of at least 160 cm² at breeding, larger breeds 180 cm² or more.
7. Do not retain daughters of cows that have a record of calving difficulties.
8. Aim to calve heifers 21-30 days prior to the planned start of calving for cows. It will allow more observation of heifers and allow them an extra period to resume cycling prior to bulling.
9. Feeding the herd later in the day will encourage more cows to calve in daylight.
10. Keep a record of calving ease for calves you observe born. If this changes over time consider reasons for this.
11. When assisting cows at calving, provide adequate time for a cow or heifer to calve prior to interfering. Do not rush in.
12. House assisted calves for a few days post calving. Studies have shown that this improves their chance of survival than if left outdoors in the immediate period post calving. If housing is limited these calves should be top priorities.

