Calving the cow: a quick guide

**STAGE 1**
0 – 6 hours (up to 24 hours in heifers)
- Seeking isolation
- Restless
- Shifting weight from one leg to the other
- Kicking at belly
- Swishing and raised tail
- Vaginal discharges become more liquid

**STAGE 2**
30 minutes – 4 hours (May be longer in heifers)
- Water bag appears
- Feet out
- Head out
- BIRTH

**INVESTIGATE**

- **STAGE 1**
  - Over 2 hours and no progress
  - Straining for 30 minutes but making no progress
  - Head and legs not gliding in and out during contractions

- **STAGE 2**
  - Feet out
  - Head out
  - BIRTH

- **INVESTIGATE**

  - Cervix sufficiently dilated for delivery?
  - Normal presentation? (Head and two front feet)
  - Head and feet in pelvic canal and can fit hand above head
  - Can pull fetlocks outside vulva
  - Front legs NOT crossed?
  - Pull horizontally until shoulders out
  - Twist calf *
  - Continue pulling until chest out
  - Then down at 45°
  - Pull when cow contracts
  - Use human power ideally

- **INVESTIGATE**

  - Backlegs first? (Soles of feet are upwards)
  - Can pull the hocks outside vulva
  - Pull in a slightly upwards direction until tail head is out, then down
  - Once tail head is out, avoid delay as the umbilical cord breaks after this point

- **INVESTIGATE**

  - Other abnormal presentations
    - Can you correct abnormal presentation?
    - Probably too big
    - Call the vet

**Intervention**

- Leave for 30 mins
- Re-examine cervix sufficiently dilated?
- Probably too big

**Caution**

- Cleanliness is vital
- Keep tail out of the way
- Clean around anus/vulva
- Wash hands and arms, and use gloves
- Use plenty of lubrication from the start

**Care with calving jacks**

- A calving jack can exert 2–3 times more force than two people pulling. Inappropriate use can cause damage to the cow and calf.

**Vet contact details**

*The Twist*

- The widest part of the cow’s pelvis is diagonally across.
- Twisting the calf once the shoulders are through, so that the calf’s hips pass through the pelvis at a diagonal angle (45°) can help ease delivery.
Care of the cow and calf post calving

**Calf is born**
- Clean mucus from nose and mouth
- Stimulate breathing:
  - Sit calf upright
  - Straw in the nose
  - Massage chest with forelimb
  - Rub the chest with clean straw
  - Cold water into ears/over the head
- Calf should be:
  - Breathing regularly AND holding its head up within **5 minutes**
  - Attempting to stand up within **15 minutes**

**Potential problems:**
- Hard calving
- Insufficient oxygen/acidosis
- Trauma during calving
  - **Call vet for advice**

**Calf**
- Colostrum
  - Starting to suckle within **1 hour** of birth
  - Hard sucking for at least **20 minutes** in the first **2 hours**
  - Dip or spray navel with disinfectant e.g. 10% iodine (if safe to do so)
  - Provide clean and dry bedding for calf

**Cow**
- If you have intervened:
  - Check for second calf
  - Check for bleeding and tears
  - Administer an anti-inflammatory/pain relief (discuss best option with your vet)
  - Provide fresh water and food

**Next day**
- Tag calf (if safe to do so)
- Move cow and calf into pen with other calved cows
- Provide calf refuge

**If difficult calving and calf is slow to get going,**
- Consider individual penning with cow. Discuss pain relief for the calf with your vet.

**If calm is not breathing,**
- Sit calf upright
- Straw in the nose
- Massage chest with forelimb
- Rub the chest with clean straw
- Cold water into ears/over the head

**Commercial mechanical aspirators/respirators are available to help remove mucus from the mouth and nose.**

**Check calf has fed by feeling for a full belly and looking at cow’s udder for signs of suckling.**

**Restrain cow and assist calf to suckle for 20 minutes**
- OR
- Give 3 litres of colostrum via stomach tube or bottle within **2 hours** of birth

**Do not hang calf over gate**
- Attend to cow or calf only if safe to do so

**Calf refuge**