



Several days before you expect her to calve, make sure the cow is where you can handle her and watch her closely. This could be a small pasture near the house. The cow's udder will start filling with milk a few days before calving and she usually can have the calf without any assistance.

Normal birth, called parturition, is described in three stages. The first stage begins with uterine contractions, includes dilation of the cervix, and ends with entry of the fetus into the birth canal. Restlessness and isolation from the herd may be the only observable signs during this stage. Heifers are generally more restless than older cows. They may appear colicky, lying down and getting up frequently or kicking at their abdomen. The first waterbag may appear toward the end of the first stage. Stage one continues for two to six hours, or sometimes longer in heifers.

The second stage comprises passage of the fetus through the birth canal. During this phase the cow actively participates in delivery by contracting her abdominal muscles to push the calf out. Fetal membranes appear and rupture ahead of the fetus, providing lubrication for its passage. Point pressure exerted in the cow's pelvis successively by the head, shoulders, and hips of the fetus intensify abdominal contractions. Mature cows are normally in second stage parturition less than two hours. Heifers may normally require three or four hours.

Once feet are showing, they should progressively advance and not appear and disappear with each abdominal contraction. If feet are protruding through the vulva with soles down, they are usually front feet. If soles are up, they are usually hind feet.

In a normal forward delivery the front feet are side by side with jaws resting on forelimbs and muzzle at about the fetlocks. The calf passes through the birth canal in an arc. As it enters the pelvic inlet, direction of travel is toward the tailhead of the cow then parallel to the cow's back, and then as the calf's hips enter the pelvis, direction of travel is toward the cow's rear feet. This arc keeps the calf high in the pelvic inlet and takes advantage of the widest horizontal diameter of the pelvic opening.

The third stage includes passing fetal membranes and closure of the cervix. The placenta is usually expelled within eight hours, after which the cervix secretes a thick mucus that helps prevent infection from entering the uterus. Within 24 to 36 hours a person's hand will not pass through the cervix; by four days only two fingers can be introduced.

If the cow is in labor for three or four hours without any progress, call the veterinarian for help.² Watch what the vet does to deliver the calf so you may be able to handle a similar situation in the future. Be especially careful with heifers having their first calf because they usually have more trouble. To avoid this problem, heifers should never be bred to a bull of a large breed such as Charolais or Simmental because the calf will be large also and increase the chances of a difficult birth.

When the calf is two to three months old, the cow should start coming into heat again and can be bred. You should be able to breed her again at the same time as the year before so she will calve every 12 months.

If you wish to use artificial insemination, either hire the breeding done or find a school where you

²Refer to SR1002 "Coping with Calving Difficulties" in the Beef Production Handbook.