K-STATE Research and Extension | Meadowlark District

February 20, 2026

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Post Calving Calf Health

Recently I watched an episode of "The Incredible Dr. Pol" where he pulled a calf and made the statement that the calf was breathing and so it would be just fine. While Dr. Pol's statement was correct, there is an ever-looming issue that can cause challenges to vibrant, thrifty calves. Post-partum health challenges are what I'm referencing for today's discussion. Proper post-partum practices to ensure calf health is extremely important.

Ensuring that cows are in an adequate nutritional status, proper body condition score of 5 or 6 and not overfed can help reduce dystocia concerns. Cow health and condition additionally has a major role in determining the quality and quantity of colostrum. Colostrum is full of protective immunoglobulins that must be absorbed across the small intestine in the calf within the first 24 hours of birth to allow the calf to develop passive immunity against common diseases until its immune system is fully functional.

Calves need to consume colostrum as soon as possible, ideally within the first half hour of birth. By 6 hours after birth, 4-6 quarts of colostrum should ideally be consumed for proper passive immunity for prevention of early-calfhood diseases. After this time, the calf's ability to absorb immunoglobulins starts to decline and concludes after 24 hours. To add another layer of prevention to disease, prior to suckling, the udder and teats should also be clean and free from manure, mud and other contamination.

Injectable vaccinations given to the dam prior to calving have been shown to provide antibodies through the colostrum. Proper dam vaccination is more effective for early life protection through the passive immunity process. Administering vaccines to the calf directly has been shown to be more effective after the calf is at least one month of age. This is because its immune system is more active, and there isn't the influence of maternal antibodies from colostrum. Proper products and protocols should be discussed with your veterinarian prior to administration.

In cold conditions, another good post-partum practice is making sure the cow has cleaned the calf off to prevent hypothermia. Cold mouths and lack of suckling reflex are common indicators of hypothermia. Warming crates/boxes, blankets, warm water bath, etc. can help raise calf internal body temperature. Cold stressed calves can have a decreased defense system against disease. The umbilical cord is a direct route to the calf's immune system and one of the most important items to address soon after calving. Inspecting the naval for abnormalities and dipping the umbilical cord in a navel dip can help reduce the risk of infection by helping the cord dry out faster.

Reducing the pathogen load in the environment around the newborn is important as well. The Sandhills Calving System has been known to reduce pathogen exposure to newborn calves by using a series of rotations throughout various calving pastures. The basic concept is that late gestation cows are moved to clean calving pastures every two weeks during the calving season. In this way, newborns are not exposed to as much of an environmental pathogen load from cows or other, older calves. Adoption of this system has been shown to reduce death loss and veterinary costs without negative impacts on calf performance.

A variety of other practices can be implemented, such as administering individual forms of identification and castrating bull calves. A final key step during calving is observing the calf to detect any abnormal signs or behaviors, especially during the first month following calving. This is a simple practice that has a direct impact on early calf health and catching things before they become issues. Considering calf health following calving is a number one priority for calving season and to better prepare the calf for the rest of its life.