

I was told by a friend who raises cattle that prolapse of the uterus during calving can be serious. I have never had cows before but just recently started raising them. How do I know that a prolapse has occurred and then what should I do if it happens?

Uterine prolapse is one of the most potentially dangerous complications associated with calving. This condition occurs shortly after calving when the uterus basically turns inside out and protrudes from the cow's vulva.

A uterine prolapse can vary in size from about 18 inches to 3 to 4 feet in a large cow. Large round to oval shaped caruncles are visible on the exposed surface of the uterus. These structures serve as the attachment sites for the placenta which nourishes the developing calf. The placenta may or may not remain attached to these caruncles during a uterine prolapse.

In beef cattle, uterine prolapse occurs most often in first calf heifers and is usually associated with prolonged labor or dystocia. When delivery of the calf is prolonged, the uterus becomes weak and flaccid allowing a prolapse to occur more easily. In dairy cattle, prolapse of the uterus is usually associated with hypocalcemia or milk fever. Low levels of calcium result in general muscle weakness including the uterus.

If you encounter this condition in one of your cows, contact a veterinarian immediately. After delivering a calf, the uterus is fed by several large arteries. These arteries are often stretched and may tear. If this happens, the cow will bleed to death in just a few minutes. Because of this concern, a cow with uterine prolapse should not be moved. This is one of the few conditions where it is best to leave the cow where she is and not move her to a pen or put her in a trailer for transport to a veterinary clinic. Restrain the cow by tying her to a tree, truck or whatever is available. Portable panels can be used to set up a pen around her. If a cow stands up while the uterus is prolapsed, she may kick as the uterus touches her rear legs, so it is best if she remains laying down. If the weather is very cold, the uterus can be wrapped in a clean blanket or towels to help keep it from freezing.

Uterine prolapse is an emergency condition and should be treated as soon as possible. Waiting until the morning is not a good option. Unlike cervical or vaginal prolapse, which occur while the cow is pregnant, uterine prolapse is not a genetically heritable trait. Affected cows do not necessarily need to be culled from the herd.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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