

# Pack 109, Item 11

Type: Script

August 2018

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**Care of a newborn calf and its mother**

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**Notes to broadcaster**

Keeping domestic animals healthy is extremely important to farmers. Animals not only provide food, they also draw ploughs and transport farm products. Their manure is an important source of fertilizer and fuel. When animals get sick or die, family income and health both suffer.

All animals have basic needs, like food and water and good housing. But animals also have a need to be treated well. This includes living in a comfortable environment, being with other animals, and avoiding situations that create stress.

When animals receive proper care, this has tremendous benefits for the owner. Well-treated domestic livestock give more milk, grow larger, and have healthier offspring. The quality of their meat is better.

Animal diseases are a major global problem. For poor farmers, the impact of livestock disease on lives and livelihoods is especially serious. An outbreak of disease can mean the difference between having enough food and hunger, between having a secure income and having to sell off important household goods.

Livestock exposed to stressful conditions such as crowded spaces, extreme temperatures, poor ventilation, inadequate shelter, and unhealthy food and water, are more susceptible to illness and parasites. Instead of depending on veterinarians when animals get sick, farmers can prevent diseases and behavioural problems by giving their animals good care, and making their livestock’s environment as safe, comfortable, and healthy as possible. Animals also need kindness, affection, and the freedom to express natural social behaviours.

This script explains how farmers can provide good care for newborn calves and their mothers. Good care results in good growth and good health. Good for the animals—and good for the farmer.

Estimated running time for the script: 10-15 minutes, with intro and outro music

**PEACOCK:** Today, I have some hints for anyone who has one or more cows and wants them to produce strong healthy calves that don't get sick easily.

To begin with, to have a healthy newborn calf, the calf's mother must be healthy while the calf is growing inside her. To be healthy, she must have plenty of good feed and clean water, especially in the last two or three months before the calf is born. And she must continue to get good feed and clean water afterwards. If your cow is healthy and well fed, she'll produce a healthier calf and the most milk possible.

Another thing: it's a lot better, when the time comes for the calf to be born, if your cow knows you and feels that you are her friend. If she's young and is going to have her first calf, this last few months before the calf is born is a good time for you to get to know her, and even more important, for her to get to know you and to feel at ease when you are near her. During this time, be kind to her, talk to her, pet her, rub her, give her a bit of salt whenever you're near her. Then when the calf comes, your cow won't mind if you're with her to help her if necessary.

Now, a few days before the calf is born, prepare a clean, dry place, with a roof if possible, where the mother can be when the calf is born. This can be a place where the calf can sleep and be sheltered from sun and rain, at least for the first few weeks of its life. Be sure to keep it clean, and dry. If you don't—if the ground gets wet and muddy, with flies and manure all over the place—your young calf can get sick very easily, and may even die. So be sure the place is ready with some clean straw or other clean, dry bedding—such as dry leaves—for the calf before it's born.

If the cow is a dairy cow that will be fed dairy meal after calving, you should gradually start feeding her some dairy meal one month before calving to get her stomach used to getting dairy meal, and to help the mother make more milk after calving. Start with half a kg per day one month before calving, and after one week, increase this to one kg per day. With each week after this, continue to increase it by another half kg per day (1 ½ kg/day at two weeks before calving, two kg/day at one week before calving), so that at calving, the mother will be ready for 2 ½ kg per day of dairy meal that you would increase as her milk production increases.

By the way, if you want to know how much feed to give her, here’s a common formula. Subtract 5 from the number of kg of milk the cow is producing, and then divide by 2. This gives you the kg of dairy ration to feed daily.

For example, if a cow is giving 10 kg of milk then:

(10 kg – 5 kg) ÷ 2 = 2.5 kg of dairy ration.

When the time comes for your calf to be born, arrange for there to be no noise or commotion anywhere near your cow. Keep children and others away so she won't be disturbed. It's good for you to be there, however, if you can. Then if something goes wrong, you can go for help. Normally, however, the calf will be born quite naturally without any help, and it's usually best not to do anything unless you have to. Just watch and see that everything's all right. Once straining starts, you should start to see a calf within four hours, (or eight hours for a first-time mother. If this does not happen, or you can see the calf but it is not coming out further from the mother for half an hour, call for assistance or provide assistance.

Another good reason for being there is so you can do something for the calf after it's born. Sometimes the newborn calf's nose is blocked with a thick, sticky liquid called mucus. If it's blocked this way, it won't be able to breathe, and could die. So, as soon as it's born, quickly clean out any mucus from inside its nostrils and around its nose and mouth. You can do this with your thumb and fingers. Another way is to push a straw up the calf's nose gently. This will make it sneeze—that's a good way to clear out the mucus. If the calf still isn't breathing after that, give it a good hard slap on its side with your hand, just behind a front leg, or vigorously rub the chest. That should help. Pouring cold water into an ear can also cause cows to shake their head, which can clear mucous.

The newborn calf should drink its mother's milk soon after it's born—within the first hour if possible, and the sooner the better.

You've probably noticed that the milk a cow produces for the first few days after her calf is born is different from the milk she produces at other times. It's thicker and more yellow in colour. That's because it has more protein and other good things in it than a cow's milk normally has. It also has something special in it called antibodies that protect the young animal from diarrhea and other troubles. This special milk helps the calf grow strong and healthy right from the beginning of its life. If your calf doesn't drink this special milk, it can get sick very easily and it could die.

Make sure, then, that your calf drinks this special milk soon after it's born. If it hasn't started drinking within an hour or two, move its nose close to the mother's udder, and squirt some milk into its mouth if necessary. Make sure the udder is clean so that the first milk meal is free from dirt. If you can remove milk from the cow and feed it to the calf, that is best because you will know how much the calf gets. It’s best for the calf to drink at least four litres of the mother’s thick first milk within the first six to twelve hours after birth to provide the best immunity against diseases.

It’s important to prevent swollen navel infections, which involves dipping or spraying it with disinfectant *immediately after birth*—and then daily until the navel is dry, which should take approximately one week. A 7-10% iodine solution works well. Ask your local pharmacist. Calves can die from swollen navel infections, so call your vet or vet tech if you noticed it is swollen.

Make sure, also, that the mother cow continues to get lots of good food and water so she'll produce enough good milk for her young growing calf to keep it strong and healthy. At least four litres per day is needed for good health and growth. Also, make sure mothers have water available at all times, especially during the dry season.

And, finally, be sure your calf has a dry, clean place to rest, with plenty of clean, dry bedding. Clean the manure and wet bedding out of the pen every day. This way, it won't get wet and dirty from mud and manure. And watch it carefully—look at it at least once or twice a day. If it seems to be getting sick, do what you can to help it get well right away. Call a veterinarian or vet technician if possible, and keep this sick animal away from others to prevent spread of the sickness.

Your calf is a valuable young animal. If you look after it well, it will grow up to be strong and healthy and it will serve you well.

**Acknowledgements**

This script was originally distributed in 1985 as Package 10, script 2. It was updated and then re-reviewed by John VanLeeuwen, Professor of Epidemiology and Ruminant Health Management, Chair—Veterinarians without Borders-Canada, Dept. of Health Management, Atlantic Veterinary College, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada.

 The original script was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada (GAC)