

CALVING EASE

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Editors

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CARING FOR TWINS

If you have cows you have twins. Farms with higher proportions of cows to heifers and with excellent milk cow feeding programs may have even higher than "normal" twinning rates. Some farms sell all their twin calves regardless of sex. Others raise only twin heifers. This letter assumes that you want to raise one or more twins.

What's unusual about twins?

Greater likelihood of birth trauma. The process of birth is longer. Frequently one or both of the twins is positioned incorrectly for normal delivery. The second twin to deliver shoves the first one around. Lots of pushing and shoving for longer than normal.

Frequently lower than normal birth weights. Many of the Holstein twins have birth weights in the 65 to 80 pounds range. That's 10 to 25 pounds lower than "normal" large-breed birth weights.

Premature delivery. How often do twins arrive roughly three weeks before the cow's normal due date? Too often for the health of the twins!

Most frustrating for the calf raiser are traumatized, underweight twins with underdeveloped respiratory systems.

This is not to say that all twins have hard deliveries, are underweight or are premature. We have all seen the exception of two full-sized, full-term twins that a fourth or fifth lactation cow had little difficulty delivering. But, this letter looks at the more usual case of the small, early twins that had a hard birth.

Newborn Care

A few of these little girls are eager eaters. More usual are the "limp dishrag" types that won't suck even an hour or two after birth. Some folks just wait until they will eat on their own to feed colostrum. We use an esophageal tube feeder to give them two quarts of mature cow colostrum as soon as we can after birth. This amount is repeated as close to eight to twelve hours later as we can manage.

Our reasoning behind "tubing" these little girls rather than waiting twelve to twenty-four hours for them to eat on their own? First, highly traumatized calves often have

lower antibody absorption rates than normal calves. We want to take advantage of the highest antibody (IgG) absorption rates as we can right after birth. Second, these sixty to seventy pound twins often have very little body fat on which to draw for initial energy. Our thought is to get as many colostrum calories into her as we can right away to fill what we see as an "energy-gap."

Frequently we have to "mother" one of the twins. The dam busily cleans off one of the twins and neglects the other. We end up toweling one of them off before dipping navels.

Neonatal Care

We seem to either fail or succeed in the first two weeks with these little twins. What about feeding? When we have transition milk available (second to fourth milking from fresh animals), we feed that the first week because of the higher solids content (about eighteen percent vs. only twelve for whole milk or milk replacer).

Except for the very smallest twins we have good success offering up to four quarts of milk daily even the first two weeks. Sometimes we have to feed this in three feedings for the under sixty pound twins. When the twins have good IgG levels in their blood we don't have problems with diarrhea. That is, feeding lots of milk doesn't seem to bother their digestion when the antibodies are there to deal with bacteria.

Aspiration of milk? Getting milk into their lungs can be just awful. They go off feed. They get big-time respiratory problems. We try to be very careful to use a low-flow nipple when bottle feeding to reduce choking. Also, when the twins are trained to drink from a bucket we often have to lower our bucket holders to prevent choking. If the bucket is too high for a short twin she presses so hard on her throat trying to reach the bucket bottom she gets milk down her windpipe.

Special cases? Especially frustrating are the twins born several weeks early in a "not-too-clean" barn with the dry cows. They often get little or no colostrum until twenty-four hours or later in life and that may come after ingesting a fair amount of adult cow manure. Survival in these cases usually means working out a procedure with your veterinarian for some kind of antibiotic treatment program to get the twins through the first couple of weeks of life.

Sum it all up?

Little twin heifers take extra time and effort. With careful newborn care and lots of TLC the first two weeks of life twins can survive. Our feeding trial data show that their rates of gain are at least as good as normal-size single-birth calves.

References: Cady, R. A. and L. D. VanVleck. 1978 " Factors Affecting Twinning and Effects of Twinning in Holstein Cattle." *J. Animal Science* 46:950. and L. C. Allenstein. 1999 "We Can Only Guess Why Top Herds Have More Twins." *Hoard's Dairyman* 144:450 (#11).

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