KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension Wildcat District

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One Udder Thing to Look At

The conformation of a beef cow's teats and udder is important in a profitable cow/calf enterprise. Females with poor configuration can be a management challenge, requiring extra time and labor to physically milk out quarters to ensure a newborn calf can suckle, or even prevent mastitis. Not to mention the safety aspect to consider when attempting to milk out a beef cow…

Udder and teat conformation is moderately heritable, so enhancing teat and udder quality can be accomplished by not selecting replacement heifers from dams that have only marginal configuration.

What characteristics does a structurally correct udder have? A strong median suspensory ligament between the left and right quarters is essential. A weak ligament results in a lower udder floor. When the udder is filled with milk, the strength of this ligament determines if the teats angle inward, outward, or straight down. Teats that are straight will enhance a newborn calf's ability to nurse. As the suspensory ligament weakens and teats lengthen, newborn calves will have a harder time suckling. Additionally, contamination risk is heightened from mud and non-mud goo.

The floor of the udder should be level, both from left to right and from front to back. The rear udder attachment needs to be high, and the front attachment should be as forward and smooth as possible. The closer the udder is to the body cavity, the more secure it is, allowing a calf to easily locate the teats.

The color of the udder can affect sun damage. Pigmentation is desirable as it provides protection against sunburn, which can be caused by direct sunlight or reflected sunlight off snow.

Teats should be of medium length and cylindrical. The diameter should be the same from top to bottom, with a rounded end. The teats should be placed in the middle of each quarter and point directly to the ground when filled with milk.

The ideal time to observe the mammary system in beef cows is within the first 24 to 48 hours after calving, just as she begins to freshen. As the median suspensory ligament becomes less pronounced with age, the udder floor becomes more rounded. So, if a heifer or young cow has problems, you can depend on the issues to intensify.

The Beef Improvement Federation created a scoring system to categorize udder suspension and teat size. In considering udder suspension, a score of 9 is most desirable, representing an udder placed tightly to the body cavity, well above the hocks. The quarters are mostly level from the side and rear view. The udder has a high rear attachment, and the median suspensory ligament is pronounced. A suspension score of 1 is not desirable; the median suspensory ligament is absent, resulting in a loose and pendulous attachment of the udder. The udder suspends below the hocks, and the teats reside below the hock. The quarters are not level, and the teats are not perpendicular to the ground when filled with milk. Intervention is required at calving, and to avoid a spoiled quarter or mastitis. Replacements should not be kept from these dams.

A teat score of 9, most favorable, indicates very small and symmetrical teats that are perpendicular to the ground. A score of 1 indicates very large teats, varying in length and symmetry.

Photo Caption: Older cow with 2-day-old calf; note the asymmetrical teat sizes and unlevel udder floor. This calf had trouble on day one with nursing that larger teat. Photo credit: Wendie Powell

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