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First Milk Important to Successful Birthing Experience

Once the newborns are on the ground in any livestock operation, there is no better sight than watching them get up and begin to nurse their mamas.

However, difficult deliveries, inexperienced dams and babies born without vigor sometimes keep that connection from happening. It is at those times when a producer may have to intervene. The chief concern is getting the colostrum into the animal within the first few hours after it is born.

Colostrum is the first milk that the newborn gets from its mother that contains a lot of immunity to set it up for the first several months of life. As soon as the little one starts drinking, it has 12-24 hours to absorb the colostrum for maximum effectiveness.

When to intervene will vary depending on the age of the dam and vigor of the freshly born baby. For a new mother, if the baby has not been observed nursing her newborn within one or two hours, a producer will likely need to get involved. For calves, the goal with assisting is to get at least one quart of colostrum into the calf. For sheep or goats, the goal with assisting is to get about 10 percent of their birthweight into them. After milking out the dam, offer it to the baby through a bottle. If it won't take a bottle, you'll need to use an esophageal tube feeder to deliver it to the stomach. If the dam is older and knows how to mother a newborn, this waiting period can be stretched.

On the topic of what to supplement colostrum to the newborn with, it is best to use its mother's milk, rather than a commercial product. The immunity in the colostrum comes from the proteins in the dam's milk. Milk from beef cows is more nutrient dense than that of dairy cows; and most commercial substitutes are made from dairy milk. If you do use a commercial product, try to get two quarts into newborn calves.

The quantity and quality of the colostrum produced by the dam has a direct correlation to the dam's body condition score. A female in good body condition will have the nutrition she needs to make the proteins to pass on the immunity to her baby.

Giving birth in a dry, clean environment is also important. The immunity is only as effective as the challenges we put it under. If the newborn is brought into the world in a mud lot and the dam's udder may be covered in mud; that will give the new baby a high pathogen challenge when it tries to nurse.

If supplementation is ultimately necessary, getting the milk delivered to the newborn at the correct temperature is critical. The goal is feeding it at a temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit, or close to internal temperature. It is best to warm up the milk in a hot water bath. If you microwave it, those valuable proteins will be destroyed.

Here are a few more tips:

- Maintain females in good body condition to maximize the quality and quantity of the colostrum they produce
- Develop herd immunity by following a vaccination schedule
- Ensure dams have a dry location in which to give birth
- Have an intervention plan in place for colostrum supplementation
- Keep intervention equipment such as a bottle or esophageal tube feeder on hand

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