

Getting that Problem Calf to Nurse

by Pat White, DVM

Highland cattle are known for their survival abilities in the harsh land for which they are named. There are times, however, when it seems that a newborn calf has some sort of death wish. It won't attempt to nurse or it will nurse on everything but the correct structure. There is much speculation as to what causes these problems and there are no absolute answers. Certainly, a difficult or prolonged calving may stress the calf to the point that it has no energy to attempt nursing. Certainly cows with large, ballooned teats may offer a special challenge to the newborn. Tall calves may not find the proper location to nurse because they just don't look low enough. And there are times when there does not seem to be an adequate explanation for the situation. I can't answer the question as to every reason that this might occur but I can describe every trick that I know to finally get the problem calf to nurse off of its mother.

My first priority for the newborn Highland calf is to make sure that it receives high quality colostrum as soon after birth as possible. Most of the time, this will occur when the calf stands and nurses. Unfortunately, the only way you can be absolutely sure the calf has nursed is to witness the event, with the teat actually in the calf's mouth, or have a blood sample analyzed from the calf that confirms the presence of antibodies in its system. The latter is not something most individuals are trained or equipped to do. I look for signs that the calf has probably nursed; palpably enlarged stomach, has passed the meconium (the first dark, slimy bowel movement formed when still in the mother), one or more of the cow's teats is noticeably smaller when it was not prior to the calf's arrival. If I know the calf has not nursed or I am suspicious that it has not, I will give it colostrum as soon as possible, ideally from the mother and from a bottle so I know the exact amount consumed.

In order to accomplish this, one thing is absolutely mandatory; a method to restrain the cow. If she is really quiet and used to being handled, there are cows out there that will stand still for you to assist their calf to nurse, or even let you milk them out. Unfortunately, most of my cows aren't that good, so we have a squeeze chute to hold the cow, with boards on the bottom that can be removed to access the udder. There is room for the calf to stand next to the cow and nurse while the cow is in the chute. I get any number of calls from people who are trying to get the calf to nurse off the cow with out any means of restraint. I can't even imagine the trial they are going through. Stubborn calves test everyone's mettle;



While most calves nurse fine on their own, sometimes assistance is needed.

sometimes a bullet in the head (use your imagination as to who's) seems like a rational alternative. Combining a stubborn calf with an unrestrained, uncooperative cow in a somewhat foul mood is masochistic at least and downright dangerous at most.

Over the years, (25 years, to be exact) I have had enough of these problem calves that I have a set method for handling them. I always try to get them started on a bottle first. I have found that once they nurse off of a bottle, it is far easier to start them on the teats than trying for the cow first.

I always straddle the calf and clamp my knees around its head when I start it on a bottle. This restrains the calf so that it has to think about nothing but the bottle I am trying to get it to drink. Some calves with a good strong sucking reflex will drink by just sliding the nipple into its mouth, but many times they are wobbly and will fall off the nipple. I find it easier to keep the calf's head in one place.

It always seems to me that the calves that are the biggest problems are invariably the bull calves. They seem to be slower and lazier. If someone else will do all the work, they will happily go along for the ride. This is not a slam against the male sex; perhaps their generally larger mass slows down their birth process and leads to these problems. Regardless of the reason, anecdotally,

bull calves are more likely to be the problem nursers.

Once I have identified my problem calf, I will attempt to get it to drink colostrum out of a bottle. I have a 2 quart calf bottle with a variety of nipples with different size holes. Some calves seem to do better with a huge hole that almost drowns them, others do better with a hole that is practically non-existent. Many times a calf just needs a little stimulation to start nursing off the cow. Getting 1-2 pints of colostrum into such a calf will be all that is necessary to stimulate its appetite and the next thing you know, they are on the teat and nursing. Other breeders use some warm electrolyte mix with glucose in it to stimulate the appetite and start that vigorous sucking reflex.

The true problems occur when considerably more effort is required to assist the calf. Some calves will drink off the bottle but will not drink off the cow. If this is due to large teat size, then the cow should be milked enough to significantly reduce the size of the teat so that it is easier for the calf to latch on. This may require multiple milkings and feedings until the calf can drink off of a large teat by itself.

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There are calves that will readily nurse off of the bottle but despite small, easily accessed teats, the calf won't drink off the cow. I will position the bottle under the cow and line it up with the cow's teats so that the calf learns to drink in the "right" position. Sometimes it is easier to have 2 people positioned on either side of the cow so that one can place the bottle underneath the cow's udder and the other can try to direct the calf to the right place. Eventually these calves can be convinced to nurse off the cow. If extremely stubborn, I will let the calf go up to 36 hours without milk so that it is very hungry when I attempt to work with it. I only use this technique when the calf is several days old, very strong and in good shape and never in extremely hot weather.

Another problem is the calf that will not nurse from the cow or the bottle. These calves must be fed with a tube or esophageal feeder. As I have said on numerous occasions, if you don't know how to tube a calf, find someone who does and have them teach you. It is easy and safe and an absolute lifesaver. The Fluid Feeder available through Nasco is excellent and I find it easier to use than other esophageal feeders I have used. The calves that will not drink from a bottle need to be tube fed at least two times a day. I attempt to feed with a bottle every time I feed and then resort to the tube if the bottle fails. If after sev-

eral days the calf will still not drink from a bottle, I will then pull the same 36 hour fast, if necessary. I offer a bottle every 12 hours but if the calf will not nurse, I don't feed it but let it go another 12 hours.

In my experience, one of the worst nursing nightmares is the calf that latches on to the wrong thing to suck on. This may be a manure ball under the tail, the long, wet hairs hanging from the cow's vulva or a hair ball in the crease of the cow's shoulder or flank. If the calf continues sucking on these areas for more than just a minute or two and keeps coming back to the same place, you must intercept. This has to be stopped immediately. I catch the pair and attempt to get the calf on the cow's udder. If this abnormal sucking has continued for any substantial amount of time, the calf will stop sucking as soon as you touch it. It will not suck off your fingers, it will not suck off a bottle, it will fight you tooth and nail when you try to cram its head into the udder. As soon as you release it, it will happily go back sucking on whatever attracted it in the first place. My technique for these problem animals involves trying to outsmart what I consider an incredibly stupid animal. If the cow is quiet and I can get to the calf when it is sucking off whatever abnormal thing it is attached to, I will slip a bottle into the calf's mouth without touching the calf. When this works it is slick; the calf will instantly start sucking on the bottle and once it has food, it quickly learns that a hairball is not adequate. Once the calf is nursing on the bottle and has colostrum, then you can use all your wiles to get the calf on the teat instead of the bottle. If you can't get the calf to take a bottle this way, whatever else you do, separate the calf from the cow so it cannot continue to nurse on the abnormal substance. Tube feed it so that it has colostrum and wait 12 hours to try again. You can start by offering it a bottle, then if that fails, reunite it with its mother and once it starts to suck the tail hairs, again attempt to slip the bottle into its mouth. If still unsuccessful, again, separate the pair. The calf cannot be allowed to continue to suck in an abnormal location. The sucking is a

comfort thing and the calf will continue to suck just to make itself feel better. The calf has to learn that sucking is responsible for food so you must prevent the calf from sucking on anything that does not contain food. If need be, once the calf is several days old and strong, the 36 hour fast can be tried here as well. It is critical that the calf is kept away from whatever it is sucking that is not normal during this time.

Occasionally you will have a calf that fools you. It appears skinny and gaunt, although certainly strong and you attempt to keep it alive by tube feeding it every 12 hours. Each and every attempt to get it to drink off the bottle is fruitless; you never see it sucking on anything abnormal, you just don't see it sucking on anything. Separate this calf from its mother as well, usually for overnight. Reunite the calf with its dam prior to tubing it the next morning and see if it goes to nursing on the cow; it may have been nursing small amounts of milk the whole time.

The key to working with these problem animals is to have patience. I have heard tales of calves that just plain would never nurse off their dam. One colleague told me of a calf that wouldn't suck on anything that wasn't rubber and red. There are probably times when you should just give up trying and resign yourself to the fact that the calf will have to be tubed until it starts drinking out of a bucket. I would suggest leaving such a calf in with a friend that already knows how to drink from a bucket and eat grain and hay. Calves learn by example and also will benefit from a bovine friend if they are separated from their mother. Calves can be weaned from milk once they are about 6-8 weeks old but they must be receiving adequate protein, fat and carbohydrates from some other source to ensure that they grow reasonable well.

Hopefully the information in this article will help those breeders who run into problem calves. May they be few and far between.