

Getting the most from your heifers

Hello! I hope you are all surviving this terrible wet weather, hopefully the sun will start shining soon as spring is slowly starting to appear. As for most farmers spring is our busiest time of year, especially for calvings, so I thought this month I would discuss the pre breeding checks we can offer in order to make sure you retain the most fertile heifers for your breeding herd. Pelvic measuring in heifers is a technique we can use to improve calving ease. It can also be a useful tool when deciding which heifers you want to use as replacements in a dairy or beef herd.

Dystocia

Dystocia or difficult calving is estimated to occur in about 10-15% of first-calf heifers and in 3-5% of mature cattle. The most common cause of dystocia is fetal-maternal disproportion or in simple terms the calf being too big for the size of the heifer.



This calf was too large to be calved naturally so had to be delivered by caesarean section

The financial implications of dystocia total much more than just veterinary costs - the hidden costs add up too. A harder calving means a longer recovery and may mean it is harder to get her back in calf, reducing productivity and profitability. Difficult calvings have an increased risk of metritis/prolapse and therefore calf survival is also reduced. So, anything we can do to make calving easier is vitally important.

The most common cause of an oversized calf is bull selection. Choosing a bull with good **direct calving ease** on EBV or £PLI figures is the first step you can take to reduce calving difficulty in heifers.

There are several other factors that also contribute. Body condition of the heifer at the time of breeding and calving is very important. Fat heifers or very thin heifers will have a much higher risk of calving difficulty, so it is important to have appropriate nutrition throughout pregnancy to ensure growth of the heifer to a mature adult frame without her becoming fat.

Pelvic size in heifers also contributes to calving ease and has been a popular topic recently, we are increasingly asked to carry out pre-breeding checks and pelvic scores on farm.

Pre – breeding checks

The optimum age for a pre-breeding check and pelvic measuring is 12-13 months old. It is important to get an accurate weight for the animal.

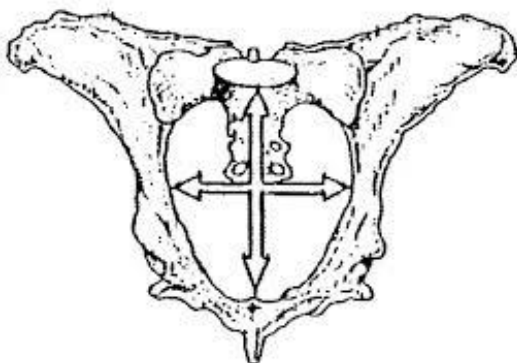
The examination starts with an ultrasound exam of the entire reproductive tract, including the ovaries. This allows us to see if the uterus has

developed and if she is cycling. This also allows us to pick up freemartins or animals which have not developed properly at this early stage.

The next stage involves measuring the pelvis. We take two measurements, one horizontally through the pelvis and one vertically using our pelvimeter (see below).



We take the vertical measurement and multiply it by the horizontal measurement to give us a rough pelvic area in cm^2 . We then use a chart to work out the factor we need to divide this area by. This factor takes into account the breed and weight of the heifer.



The value at the end of these calculations gives you a rough estimate of birthweight of a live calf that the heifer will be able to calve safely.

How to use this information

This information is very useful, you can use it to select a bull to help give you the best possible chance of an easy calving. This may mean you choose to AI your heifers to bulls with EBVs for lower birth weights (to coincide with your birthweight scores) rather than run a bull with unknown progeny size.

Cathy runs an AI course once a month, so if you are interested give her a ring. There are an increasing number of suckler herds using this technique. It helps you select the best heifers to breed from a group.

It may also help you identify any heifers that have particularly small pelvic openings and you may choose not to breed from those animals.

It is important to stress that pelvic size is only one factor contributing to calving ease and doing these measurements and then selecting an inappropriate bull defeats the point! Good management up to, during and after calving is vitally important to cow and calf survival.

If you are interested in pre-breeding checks and pelvic measurements then speak to your vet, who will be more than happy to discuss it with you.

All the best this spring and let's hope it stops raining soon!

Georgie

