

## Staying safe during the calving season

### Purpose:

To promote safe practices around cows at calving time

### Why:

Cows with calves are responsible for a high proportion of cattle-related incidents involving farmers and members of the public. Many of these incidents only result in a minor injury, however, in some cases, there will be life-changing injuries or even a fatality.

### TIAH Capability Framework area:

This aligns with the knowledge and skills in the Health and Safety area.

<https://tiah.org/tiah-capability-framework>

### Talk leader instructions:

- Prepare to do the talk in a suitable/quiet location with no distractions
- Consider using some of the resources as part of the talk, e.g. showing a video
- Engage with participants, ask questions and give everyday examples
- Conclude with a brief review
- Get everyone to sign the form. Make sure to write the name of the farm and the date. Keep a copy in your Health and Safety records
- Ensure all participants have access to a copy of this document to refer to once the session has finished. This could be electronic and emailed or printed

## Background

Cattle are not legally considered dangerous animals unlike a lion, tiger, or crocodile. However, cattle can inflict fatal or life-changing injuries in particular circumstances, unless they are suitably restrained, due to their size, speed, and bulk.

Cows around calving and when they have calves at foot are key times when they may exhibit a hard-wired instinctive behaviour to protect their calves irrespective of breed, age, or rearing environment. Even when handlers and stockpersons are known to them, they have the potential to become aggressive.

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), livestock incidents were the number one cause of work-related death in British agriculture in 2022/23. Livestock or moving vehicles were responsible for 77 fatalities in the last five years. Countless near misses also go unrecorded.

Optional – Watch beef and sheep farmer Rob's story when he was attacked by a cow shortly after calving <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVi7id2kAc4>

## Main learning points



### Q. Why is the cow a higher risk at calving time?

#### Prey animals

As a mammalian herbivore, a pregnant cow will naturally want to find a safe and quiet calving place. At this time, she may see any approach as a potential threat. As the cow has a strong natural drive to protect the calf at calving time or when there are young calves at foot any cow needs to be approached with care and caution irrespective of her normal demeanour.



#### Parental investment

A cow puts a relatively high level of parental investment into a calf. She typically has one calf after a 283-day gestation, compared to sheep that have twins after a 152-day gestation period. This may explain why cows can be very protective irrespective of breed and management system. This is amplified by increased hormones before, during and after calving, such as the stress hormone cortisol, which will make a cow edgier than normal.

#### Hiders

A calf will instinctively lay down out of sight for much of its early life. It's how it would avoid the sight of predators in the wild. Cows will hide calves individually for the first five days or so (like deer), then start to create creches. At this stage, the cow will return to the calf and only at seven to nine weeks of age will a calf begin to follow its mother around for long periods. Incidents happen if we put ourselves between the cow and her calf, or if we go to check a calf, we don't keep our eyes open for the returning mother.

#### Dog equals threat

A cow is very likely to see a dog as a clear threat, almost like a wolf or a fox. Farm dogs or dog walkers in fields with a dog or several dogs (which could look like a pack) are likely to trigger the natural protective behaviours.

### Notes:

## Notes:

## Suggestions/ ideas:

### Q. What can be done to reduce or control the risks?

Whether she is a 450kg Jersey cross or a 900kg continental cow, a calving cow is 5-10 times heavier than a stock person. Our thought processes and reactions can be flawed and slow during calving, particularly if you are calving a cow at 3 am or after several weeks of calving. Lone working and age (over 65) are also common factors in cattle-related fatalities.

### Elimination:

#### Q. Can the hazard be eliminated?

- Reporting any animal showing aggressive behaviours to your supervisor or manager so this can be recorded
- Having a zero-tolerance policy and culling any dangerous cows can help reduce the risks

### Substitution:

#### Q. Can the hazard be substituted?

- Proactively select animals you can work with and use calving records and notes to influence breeding decisions
- Using docility-scored animals and selecting a breed or type that matches the labour resources and abilities of those who will handle them
- Selecting animals for easy calving also reduces the likelihood of restraining or assisting cows in the first instance, maximum supervision minimum interference

### Engineering controls:

#### Q. What controls can be put in place?

Using physical barriers to keep cattle and people separate.

- Calving pens should have calving gates to protect people. These should feature space for the cow's head to fall to the floor if required and a quick release latch
- When you need to enter a pen with an unrestrained animal is there an easy escape route? Can you get under, over, behind or through? These options need to be feasible for all physical abilities
- If outdoors, a vehicle or vehicles can be used as barriers. Make sure they'll do the job.... a quadbike may not be sufficient
- Specialist equipment such as a calf catcher may be worth the investment

### Admin and PPE Controls: Adopting safer ways of working

When working with cattle you must be fully trained and competent. If you are unsure of anything, you must inform your manager so that you can get the training or support you need to carry out your work safely.

Your manager may set some agreed "red lines" and a simple safe system of work for anyone working with cattle.

For example, before getting in with an animal:

- Stop and score... Assess the behaviour and listen to your gut!
- Have the experience and ability to notice warning signs when an animal is scared or agitated and know how to respond
- Only enter a pen if you can get out... Note where your escape routes are – you should have at least one
- When using a race, don't get in with large cattle and don't put your arms or legs through the race wall
- Always wear the correct PPE – for example overalls and steel toecap boots
- Where possible have a colleague with you. If this isn't possible, waiting for support or a quick call to tell people what you are about to do might stop you from taking a risk and quickly getting the right help at the right time. CCTV is also helpful, but it shouldn't be a substitute for having a colleague with you
- When carrying out fieldwork, use good mobile handling facilities and have a safe refuge such as a vehicle close by

**Remember: STAY OUT, STAY SAFE, SEEK HELP!**

Notes:

Suggestions/ ideas:

## Discussion points

 8 minutes

If you wish, you can choose two of the following discussion points to discuss with your team and complete the remaining one at another time.

### Q: What should you do to stay safe when working around calving cows and cows with young calves at foot

Responses might include:

- Move cows to calving pens or designated fields in advance so they can settle
- To handle cattle safely in sheds or fields, consider hanging additional gates, placing bales or installing additional fencing in key corners that cattle 'favour'
- Never enter a confined space with a cow that's calving without ensuring you have an exit strategy.... Can you get over, under, behind or through the area?
- Approach the cow from the side where she can see you and move slowly and calmly. Your instinct may be to go behind her to monitor or help but you will surprise or startle animals coming from behind as they won't see you in their blind spot
- Talk quietly to indicate your presence before you appear
- Recognise the signs of anxiety, such as tail swishing, ears pinned back, and whites of the eyes showing – step back and don't turn your back on her
- Don't be concerned to see a calf lying down. If you go to a lying calf keep your eyes on the cow and be ready to retreat quickly to a safe place if mum makes her presence felt. **Note:** Calving cameras or alert systems can help you be at hand to check whether a calf has sucked. The rough guidelines are for 20 minutes of suckling in the first two hours of the calf's life
- Keep farm dogs out of sheds, fields, and pens where cattle are calving or have recently calved

### Q: What should you do to keep others safe around calving cows and cows with young calves at foot

Responses might include:

- Don't place calving cows where they might become a risk to others
- Keep calving cows and cows with young calves at foot out of fields where there's a public right of way
- Check that gates, fences and stiles are safe and fit for purpose
- Mark paths clearly so that users don't enter fields without public access
- Plan how to move cattle safely from field to field so that they are adequately controlled and don't cause public concern, damage or injury
- Consider alerting the public to the presence of cattle in a field where there's public access

Full guidance can be found in the HSE information – Cattle and public access in England and Wales: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ais17ew.pdf>

### Q. Why do people take risks around cows when they're calving?

Responses might include:

- The instinctive urge to attend to the calf means people lose sight of the behaviour of the cow
- Complacency having never had an incident before either with a particular cow or at any other time
- Not consciously thinking "what will I do if?" and assuming it will be fine
- Not acknowledging physical limitations, for example, age, an existing injury or generally not feeling alert or well
- Not wanting to "waste time" by getting additional equipment in place or asking others to assist you
- Not wanting to "bother others" and thinking you'll be fine working alone

### Get into a safe habit!

As stock people our instincts to help the cow and calf often mean we don't think of our safety first ... **make it a habit to ... STOP, LOOK, THINK.....then ACT!..** those 10 seconds could save your life.

In summary, anyone working with cattle must be fully trained and competent. They should be aware of the risks associated with working with cattle, especially during calving time and understand what they can do to help keep themselves and others safe and reduce the risk of injury or fatality.

Resources:

**Work Right Agriculture: Working safely with cattle checklist:**  
<https://workright.campaign.gov.uk/campaigns/agriculture/safe-animal/>

**NADIS: Safe Cattle Handling:** <https://www.nadis.org.uk/disease-a-z/cattle/safe-cattle-handling/#:~:text=Cattle%20are%20less%20sure%20footed,is%20the%20fear%20of%20slipping.>

**HSE: Livestock safety:** <https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/topics/livestock.htm>

**AHDB: The importance of observation in cattle handling:** <https://ahdb.org.uk/news/the-importance-of-observation-in-cattle-handling>

**HSENI: Animals – safety during calving:** <https://www.hseni.gov.uk/articles/animals-safety-during-calving#:~:text=work%20out%20an%20escape%20route,heifer%20when%20checking%20the%20calf>

**Temple Grandin: Animal Behaviour:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWqN1T5b-b4>

**Herdwatch: Spring Calving Series – Staying Safe on the Farm:** <https://herdwatch.com/blog/spring-calving-series-staying-safe-on-the-farm/>

**Agriland: Top tips for staying safe during calving season:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLxsMLJjb9Q>

Toolbox Talk participants

Toolbox Talk: **Staying safe during the calving season**

Name of farm .....Date .....

Talk leader name.....

| Name | Signature | Date |
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