

News Column

by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent  
110 Courthouse Plaza  
Manhattan, KS 66502

For Release 09/13/21  
Phone: 785/537-6350  
Fax: 785/537-6353

## EARLY WEANING – PREPARING FOR WINTER

A few years back I overheard one of my Extension Ag agent friends happily exclaim to the female agent next to her that nursing a baby was great because she could eat anything she wanted and not gain weight. She said this after snarfing down a burger and fries and while eyeing everybody else's plates, hoping they would offer her their leftovers.

That, of course, led to a discussion about early weaning calves so cows can gain weight and be ready to breed back the next spring.

If you knew this friend – and some of you do – you would understand how Kara's comment about nursing moms could turn into a conversation about heifer management. Among Extension agents these conversations are normal, but I will admit that it took my wife a few years to get used to being compared to a cow.

This is a side story that has nothing to do with today's topic, but my wife decided it was OK for me to apply my cow knowledge to humans after the birth of our first child. During a labor that lasted over 20 hours, with something like 3 1/2 hours of hard pushing, I kept thinking, "if this was a heifer we wouldn't let her go more than two hours – we'd get out the chains and pull that thing."

I later told my wife what I had been thinking during her struggle and she told me that when we did this again I should just tell those doctors what I knew and to stop being so careful to not offend someone.

Fast forward to 11 years later, when our next biological child was due and we were headed to the hospital. Pam's instructions to me were clear — I was to tell that doctor what I knew about delivering calves, and NOT let the delivery drag out longer than it should.

It took three tries — with the doctor telling my wife she was doing great and me firmly telling the doctor, “You need to help her!” — before the doctor finally got out the forceps to deliver a 9 ½ pound baby.

We couldn't write it in the calf book as an unassisted delivery, but we didn't care. Momma and baby were doing good and that's what mattered.

Now, back to those heifers that need to gain a little weight in the fall so they will breed back in the spring. Weaning calves a little earlier is a great first step toward putting weight on some thinner heifers and cows.

As forage quality in pastures begins to decline in late summer and early fall it can be difficult for some cows to maintain body condition. Young cows – first and second calf heifers – seem to have the hardest time maintaining weight while nursing a calf.

The nutrient requirements of cows are at their lowest for approximately 45 to 60 days post weaning when calves are weaned at about eight months of age. The cow will start needing more nutrients again a couple of months after weaning, when the developing calf she is carrying is closer to full term.

A good way to extend the period time when nutrient needs are low for a cow is to wean her calf a month or two earlier. Many times just removing the calf will do the job, but supplemental feed can be provided to cows that are really thin.

Now is the time to start getting those spring calving cows back in shape. Cows with more condition going into the winter will experience less cold stress when temperatures drop, and will

stay in better condition and breed back quicker the following spring.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to [gmcclure@ksu.edu](mailto:gmcclure@ksu.edu).

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.