Newborn cattle are called calves. Calves instinctively start feeding on their mothers’ milk almost immediately after being born.

The mother’s initial milk is extremely important during the calf’s first three days of life. This first milk provides vitamins, minerals, protein and energy and contains antibodies, which boost the calf’s immune system. The antibodies are absorbed by the calf’s intestinal tract.

Weaning occurs naturally when the calf is about six to ten months old. Once weaned, female cows are called heifers. Males are called bull calves. Some bull calves are put into a breeding cycle while others are raised for markets. Heifers reach sexual maturity at about 15 months. They are then bred with bulls and give birth at the age of 2 years. The gestation period is nine months. Once bred, a heifer is called a cow or, in some areas, a “first-calf heifer” until their second calf is born. Cows are often bred for about five to seven years and then sent to market.

WHAT BEEF CATTLE NEED: DELIVERY AND CARE FOR NEWBORN CALVES AND DAMS

Most cows deliver calves without complications. Cattle owners should learn to recognize the signs that a pregnant cow is about to deliver and should become familiar with the signs of a normal delivery.

When cows have difficulty with delivering a calf, someone who knows the techniques and equipment should be available to help them immediately.

Each newborn calf should receive colostrum as soon as possible, preferably within 4 hours after being born. **Colostrum** is a form of milk that mammals produce in late pregnancy. This liquid is essential for the health of newborn farm animals. It gives them the antibodies they need to fight disease. It also contains more protein than ordinary cow’s milk.

Newborn calves should drink at least 1.5 to 2 litres of colostrum as soon as possible after they are born. This amount is about 5 percent of the animal’s body weight. After that, calves should drink 8 to 10 percent of their body weight in colostrum or whole milk over each 24-hour period. They should drink this total amount over three feedings per day, for the first three days of their lives.

The amount of milk a calf needs will vary. When the weather is cold, calves need more energy to maintain body heat. Sudden changes in a calf’s diet, force-feeding or using poor quality milk or milk substitutes, can cause health risks for the calf, including diarrhea. A calf becomes cold-stressed at temperatures below 10°C, and will need more energy to maintain its health and grow.

Dams should have an individual calving pen, or enough space to allow for people to help during delivery, and provide a comfortable, dry, clean environment for the cow and the calf.

**A cow needs space that allows it to safely deliver its calf.**
What does the Code of Practice say about delivery and neonatal care for calves?

- [Cattle owners] must be familiar with the signs of approaching parturition and be ready to provide assistance as necessary.
- Delivery without complication is the most common case in cattle. Therefore, before administering assistance to a cow, [cattle owners] should be familiar with the signs of normal delivery. Cows having difficulty with calving (dystocia) should be assisted immediately by a competent person using proper equipment and accepted veterinary techniques.
- Each calf should receive colostrum as soon as possible preferably within 4 hours after birth.

WHAT BEEF CATTLE NEED: CARE FOR EARLY WEANED CALVES

Most calves remain with their dams, or mothers, for at least 5 months after they are born. During the first month, dams and calves should be checked daily or as often as possible to make sure they are getting enough food and are healthy.

A calf is weaned when it no longer gets milk from its mother. Calves that are weaned early require special care from someone who knows animal husbandry, or animal care practices. It is especially important for an early weaned calf to receive enough colostrum to protect it from disease as it grows.

Early weaned calves need:

- High-quality milk replacers suitable for their age — the product label will say for what age the replacer is suitable.
- Good-quality roughage or commercial ration by at least 2 weeks of age, to promote rumen development — rumen is the larger part of the first of four compartments in a cow’s stomach. It contains the bacteria that help break down the cellulose and fibre in a cow’s diet.

Early weaned calves need access to fresh, clean water at all times.
What does the Code of Practice say about caring for early weaned calves?

- In the present beef cattle management systems most calves stay with their dams for at least 5 months after birth. Particularly during the first month of life, calves should be observed regularly (preferably daily) to ensure that they are adequately nourished and are healthy.
- Early weaned calves need specialized care from a competent person using accept animals-husbandry practices.
- Every effort should be made to ensure that early weaned calves receive sufficient colostrum to protect them from disease during their postnatal development. Newborn calves should consume at least 1.5 – 2 litres (about 5% of body weight) of colostrum as soon as possible after birth and certainly within the first 4 hours of life. Thereafter calves should consume at least 8 to 10 percent of body weight in colostrum or whole milk over each 24 hour period divided into three feedings for the first three days of life.

- Early weaned calves should received only high-quality milk replacers appropriate for their age as specified by the product label. A good-quality roughage or commercial ration should be available on a free choice basis by at least 2 weeks of age, to promote rumen development.
- Early weaned calves must have access to clean, fresh water at all times.
- Utensils for feeding liquids should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized immediately after each use. Troughs and buckets should be clean and any stale feed be removed. Automatic feeding equipment should be cleaned regularly and frequently.

The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Beef Cattle will be updated and completed by the summer of 2013. Priorities for the updated Code include weaning strategies. Information on the progress of this new Code can be found on the National Farm Animal Care Council website at www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice/beef-cattle.

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The process for the development of updated Codes can be accessed through the National Farm Animal Care Council at www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice.