



## NORTHWEST VETS NEWSLETTER

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### A New Twist on an Old Problem

By **Liz Brock, DVM**

Uterine torsions, or a twisted uterus, represent the most frequent cause of calls to NWVA for difficult calvings. In fact, cattle are the most likely animal species to have uterine torsions. These cases can be relatively easy to resolve or can become lengthy struggles often without good results for the cow or the calf. As veterinarians, we often preach prevention as the best tool in our medicinal toolbox, but why do uterine torsions occur?

A quick review of the research yields few answers. Historical reviews of cases seen by veterinary hospitals show that the animal most at risk for a uterine torsion is a big bodied cow at term carrying one large, male calf, often housed in a group calving pen. Granted, we can all immediately think of examples of animals from our experience that fit none of these criteria. However, research looks for generalities from which to draw conclusions. Using this “general” case as an example, researchers then theorize why torsions occur. A big bodied cow has more space in her abdomen to allow for the uterus to twist, whereas a heifer carrying the same animal is all out of room. A big calf is perhaps more active contributing to the flip. Animals in group housing may be more prone to getting up and down more frequently or potentially getting bumped by another cow, increasing the likelihood that the uterus will twist. These are some of the most common theories to explain uterine torsions, however the fact remains, we still don’t truly understand the disease.

Without tools to prevent it, early identification becomes critical in a successful outcome. Complications of a twisted uterus occur for many reasons, but most are worsened by delayed intervention. The cervix is triggered to dilate by the pressure of the calf’s feet and nose. When the uterus is twisted, the calf cannot engage as normal, so often the cervix is not adequately dilated after correcting a torsion. In addition, live calves often help the process by kicking and wiggling in the uterus as the veterinarian untwists it. Untwisting the uterus is often the easy step. Waiting too long can make the difference between a normal vaginal delivery and a fetotomy or C-section.

So how do you spot a twisted uterus? Cows with uterine torsions will likely show signs of early labor – separating herself from the herd when possible, getting up and down frequently, and even straining or bloody discharge – with no progress. Cows often go off feed and appear to breathe harder. If you arm the cow, you will feel tight bands of tissue, like a twisted up towel, and will sometimes not be able to feel the cervix.

Over the next months, we will be collecting some observational data on your twisted uterus cases. We will ask questions about the dam and take measurements of the calf on delivery when possible. I will personally be following up on cases after the fact to ask questions about cow and calf health and survival in the herd. Participation is completely voluntary, but data collected from your farms could help the dairy community as a whole better understand why uterine torsions occur and then hopefully, help us suggest techniques to prevent them.