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Retained Foetal Membranes (RFM's)

Retained foetal membranes (RFM) are a common condition of cows. The membranes are considered to be retained if they are not passed before 12 hours post calving. Cows experiencing retained foetal membranes often have membranes protruding from the vulva post calving or a foul smell vaginal discharge.

There are many known predisposing factors for retention of foetal membranes, and these include calving difficulties, abortion, abnormal gestational length, heat stress, uterine inertia, fatty liver, failure of placental maturation, twin births, and selenium/vitamin E deficiency.

RFM's should not be attempted to be removed less than 96hrs post calving. If attempting to remove the membranes too soon, when detachment has not occurred, there is a risk of uterine trauma increases and this predispose to uterine infection and reduced fertility.

Minimally invasive approach to managing RFM's is to cut the membranes off at the level of the vulva and allow the intrauterine portion of the membranes to macerate and be expelled over time.

When attempting to remove the RFM's manually, a gloved arm what has lubricant applied is inserted into the vulva and extended into the cervix or uterus (depending on the level of cervix closure). You then gently wrap the membranes around your hand and gentle traction is applied. This process may be repeated several times if there is a large portion of the membranes retained. The membranes should have already spontaneously detached from the caruncles and the membrane should then be removed easily from the reproductive tract.

Once the membranes have been removed, the cow should be monitored for signs of illness (fever, lethargy, reduction in milk production and reduced appetite) and a vaginal discharge. The cow should be submitted for a reproductive examination within three weeks of treatment to assess for signs of endometritis and allow for early treatment if necessary.

Prevention of RFM's is through a thorough and systematic investigation of the know predisposing to identify the cause specific to the farm. Short term preventative measures include blanket treatment with oxytocin and/or Prostaglandin F_{2α} at calving, however, there is limited evidence on the benefits for both these treatments. Long term preventative measures include ensuring cows have an adequate transition period: 3-4 weeks prior to calving. This would include a targeted complete transition diet to prepare the cows for lactation.

References

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