

**EXTENSION****AFS-3360**

Working with livestock during pregnancy

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Introduction

In rural and agricultural communities, working with livestock is often a way of life. For many pregnant women, stepping away from the farm isn't realistic — or even desirable. However, working with livestock during pregnancy carries unique risks that must be taken seriously. From disease exposure to physical strain and medication hazards, understanding how to manage these risks is key to protecting both mom and baby's health.

This fact sheet provides practical, research-based recommendations for safely continuing livestock work during pregnancy, with a focus on preventing zoonotic infections, adjusting physical workloads and avoiding harmful medications.

Zoonotic disease risks

Zoonotic diseases are illnesses that can be transmitted from animals to humans. During pregnancy, changes in the immune system make women more susceptible to infections, and some infections can be more severe. Certain zoonotic pathogens are especially dangerous during pregnancy and may lead to miscarriage, preterm labor or other serious complications. Most of these pathogens are transmitted through mucous membranes, which line the reproductive tract, mouth and eyes. If you experience illness of any kind during pregnancy, contact your healthcare provider immediately.

Key precautions

- **Avoid contact with pregnant animals**, especially during late gestation and parturition. Do not assist with births or reproductive procedures during pregnancy.
- **Never handle aborted fetuses, placentas or dead animals**, even with gloves. These can carry dangerous pathogens such as *Listeria*, *Brucella*, *Chlamydia*, Q fever and *Toxoplasma gondii*, which can lead to miscarriage, birth defects or severe maternal illness.
- **Do not be present during or shortly after changing bedding or cleaning stalls**, especially in enclosed or poorly ventilated barns, where dust and aerosols may carry infectious agents.
- **Wear personal protective equipment (PPE)** such as gloves, boots, a well-fitting mask and eye protection when working near animals. For extra precaution, wear long sleeves, use full-length palpation sleeves and layer nitrile gloves over them when handling animals.
- **Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water** after any contact with animals, feed, bedding or equipment, and avoid eating or touching your face while in the barn.
- **Keep animal areas clean and well-ventilated** to reduce the spread of airborne or surface-based pathogens.

If your operation has experienced abortions, neonatal losses or reproductive disease, it may be worth consulting your veterinarian about serological testing. This involves taking blood samples from animals to detect past or current exposure to specific pathogens. Understanding which diseases are present in your herd can help you and your healthcare provider better assess your personal risk and plan appropriate precautions.

Common high-risk zoonotic infections during pregnancy

The following diseases are particularly dangerous for pregnant women working with livestock. While some cause mild illness in the general population, they can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth or severe complications during pregnancy. Each disease is presented with its common sources, risks and prevention strategies.

Q fever

- **Source:** Caused by the bacteria *Coxiella burnetii*, Q fever is primarily transmitted by goats, sheep and cattle, especially around the time of birthing. The bacteria are shed in large amounts in the placenta, birth fluids, urine, feces and milk, and can become airborne in dust.
- **Risk:** In pregnant women, Q fever can cause miscarriage, preterm birth or stillbirth. Inhalation of contaminated dust is the most common route of exposure.
- **Prevention:** Avoid being in or near barns during lambing, kidding or calving, and never assist with animal births. Do not clean stalls or handle bedding used during parturition. Maintain barn ventilation and sanitation, and let others handle reproductive tasks.

Brucellosis

- **Source:** Brucellosis is caused by various *Brucella* bacteria species, and transmitted through contact with infected reproductive fluids, placentas or aborted fetuses. It affects cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, bison, elk and feral swine. Some wildlife can be long-term carriers and introduce disease to domestic herds.
- **Risk:** Brucellosis in humans is a serious illness and can result in recurrent fever, fatigue, joint pain, and in pregnant women, it is linked to miscarriage and fetal infection.
- **Prevention:** Avoid all contact with birthing fluids, placentas and reproductive tissues. Do not assist with parturition. If your herd regularly co-mingles with wild or feral animals, talk to your veterinarian about disease testing and vaccination options.

Toxoplasmosis

- **Source:** Caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, Toxoplasmosis is shed in the feces of infected cats, and can also be found in sheep and goats during lambing/kidding. Oocysts in cat feces become infectious after one to five days and can contaminate feed, bedding or surfaces.
- **Risk:** Toxoplasmosis is often asymptomatic in adults but can cause miscarriage, stillbirth or serious congenital birth defects if contracted during pregnancy.
- **Prevention:** Do not handle cat litter, manure or bedding from sheep or goats during lambing or kidding seasons. If exposure is unavoidable, wear gloves and thoroughly wash hands and clothing afterward. Keep cats out of feed storage and lambing pens.

Listeriosis

- **Source:** Caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*, this bacteria thrives in spoiled silage and can be transmitted by sheep, goats, and cattle. *Listeria* often causes mild symptoms in animals but can be present in manure, milk or the environment.
- **Risk:** In humans, listeriosis may cause fever, muscle aches and gastrointestinal signs, but in pregnancy, it can result in miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal infection.
- **Prevention:** Do not handle or feed spoiled silage or moldy feed. Keep feed bins and equipment clean. Avoid working in feeding areas where spoiled materials are handled or dumped. If you suspect *Listeria* in your herd, notify your veterinarian immediately.

Critical prevention reminder

Never handle an aborted fetus, placenta or birth fluids — even with gloves. These materials pose one of the highest risks of zoonotic transmission during pregnancy. Protective clothing and PPE are not sufficient to prevent all exposures. Delegate all reproductive waste handling to others.

Physical demands and modifications

Pregnancy brings natural physical changes that can affect balance, mobility, endurance and core strength. These changes may increase the risk of slips, falls and fatigue — especially in physically demanding or unpredictable environments like livestock barns or uneven terrain.

Continuing to work on the farm during pregnancy is often possible, but it should be done with intention, preparation and attention to safety. Adjusting workloads, modifying tasks and using ergonomic tools can help reduce strain and prevent injury.

It is strongly recommended that pregnant women consult with their healthcare provider to discuss personal limitations based on the stage of pregnancy, medical history and daily responsibilities. Regular communication between healthcare professionals and farm families can help ensure that both mother and baby stay safe and healthy throughout the pregnancy.

How pregnancy affects physical work

- **Balance and stability:** The shift in center of gravity increases the risk of falls, especially in the second and third trimesters.
- **Fatigue:** Physical exertion can feel more difficult, especially during early pregnancy and the later weeks.
- **Joint laxity:** Hormones like relaxin loosen ligaments, making joints more prone to strain or injury.

Work modifications for safety

- **Avoid heavy lifting or pushing,** particularly after the first trimester. Use carts, mechanical lifts or ask for help.
- **Limit interaction with large or aggressive animals, especially intact males,** to avoid being bumped or knocked down.
- **Take regular breaks** to avoid fatigue-related accidents.
- **Focus on lower-risk tasks** such as feeding, monitoring or recordkeeping when possible.
- **Never work alone.** Always have someone nearby when working with animals or heavy equipment. Animals should always be handled in a secure and safe manner to avoid injury. Facilities should be evaluated for safety.

Recommended role adjustments

- Shift toward supervisory, planning or office-based responsibilities as pregnancy progresses.
- Keep walkways dry, clear and well-lit.
- Use tools like wheelbarrows, mechanical gates and chutes to avoid manual handling of animals.

Medication exposure risks on the farm

Many livestock operations use medications and hormones that may pose risks during pregnancy — even with passive exposure through skin contact, inhalation or residue on equipment.

This is **not a complete list**, but a summary of common livestock medications known to pose reproductive or developmental risks. Always consult your veterinarian or physician if you are pregnant and working around animal treatments.

Safe practices for medication exposure

- Always assume a drug may pose a risk unless cleared by a medical professional.
- Wear gloves, a mask and protective clothing around medication storage, mixing or administration areas.
- Store drugs securely in clearly labeled cabinets, away from food and shared equipment.
- Clean and disinfect any surfaces or tools that contact medications.
- Ask your vet about alternatives or modified protocols appropriate for pregnancy.

High-risk medications

Prostaglandins

- **Examples:** Lutalyse, Estrumate.
- **Use:** Reproductive synchronization protocols.
- **Risk:** Can trigger uterine contractions and miscarriage with even minimal exposure (skin contact or inhalation.)
- **Prevention:** Pregnant women should not handle, administer or be present when prostaglandins are used.

Corticosteroids

- **Examples:** Dexamethasone, Flumethasone.
- **Use:** Anti-inflammatory treatments; used in some birth induction protocols.
- **Risk:** May interfere with pregnancy hormone balance and fetal development, especially in early gestation.
- **Prevention:** Avoid handling; only use under veterinary direction with full PPE.

Tetracyclines

- **Examples:** LA-200 (oxytetracycline.)
- **Use:** Broad-spectrum antibiotics for respiratory, joint or reproductive infections.
- **Risk:** May affect fetal bone and tooth development.
- **Prevention:** Do not handle or administer without gloves and proper PPE. There is a high risk for inadvertent absorption through the skin when handling these drugs.

Reproductive hormones

- **Examples:** GnRH, Chorionic Gonadotropin (eCG), CIDRs, Regumate, MGA.
- **Use:** Estrus Synchronization, timed artificial insemination and estrus suppression. Feedlots routinely mix MGA (progesterone) into heifer rations to suppress estrus.
- **Risk:** May interfere with endocrine function or pregnancy hormones if accidentally absorbed or injected.
- **Prevention:** Avoid exposure; assign administration to non-pregnant individuals, ensure rations do not contain reproductive hormone additives prior to handling.

Conclusion

Pregnant women play a vital role on farms and ranches. With the right precautions, they can continue to work with livestock while protecting both their health and their baby's.

Key safety takeaways

- Avoid all contact with aborted fetuses and birthing fluids.
- Protect yourself from zoonotic disease with proper hygiene, protective gear and distancing from high-risk activities.
- Adapt physical tasks to reduce fall, strain and fatigue risks.
- Understand the risks of veterinary drugs and avoid handling high-risk medications.

Finally, pregnant women should maintain regular communication with both their healthcare provider and veterinarian. With awareness, support and planning, it is possible to stay engaged in farm work safely during pregnancy.



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