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Mother-young relationships in Belgian Blue cattle after a Caesarean section: characterisation and effects of parity

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Abstract

The systematic use of Caesarean section in "double muscled" Belgian Blue cattle can induce ethical concerns. The aims of the following study was to characterise mother-young relationships in such a situation and to assess the effect of parity. Fifteen heifers and 15 cows of the Belgian Blue breed were observed using video recording when isolated with their calf during the 3 days following Caesarean, a rapid surgery with rare occurrence of aggressive behaviour and no sign of cows' discomfort or weakness. All calves were bottle-fed mother's colostrum once before first suckling occurred. Heifers' calves received a supplementary number of three such artificial meals, while cows' calves needed only one. The overall median time to first licking of the calf by the mother was 3.3 min without any effect of parity. The **Processing math: 100%** was 29.2±15.8 per 24 h: heifers licked their calf less frequently

than cows, respectively 23.4 ± 15.3 per 24 h versus 35.1 ± 14.5 per 24 h ($P < 0.05$). The mean total licking duration was 42.2 ± 25.9 min per 24 h: there was no significant difference between heifers and cows. The overall median time to first suckling was 6.1 h, without any effect of parity. The mean suckling frequency was 8.4 ± 4.8 per 24 h: for half of these suckling bouts, the calf was situated on the left side of the mother, i.e. the side of the scar. The suckling frequency was negatively correlated with the number of artificial meals ($r = -0.45, P < 0.05$). Heifers suckled their calf less often than cows, respectively 6.1 ± 3.1 per 24 h versus 10.7 ± 5.2 per 24 h ($P < 0.01$), but the left side proportion was not significantly different. The mean suckling total duration was 35.3 ± 21.0 min per 24 h. The calf was on the left side of the mother during half of this time. Heifers suckled their calf during a shorter time than cows, respectively 26.9 ± 20.0 min per 24 h versus 43.8 ± 19.1 min per 24 h ($P < 0.05$), and the left side proportion was not significantly different. Licking frequency and suckling duration were positively correlated ($r = 0.43, P < 0.05$). Only 10% of the mothers (one heifer and two cows) butted their calf and kicking was never observed. Despite the difficult comparison with results of the literature according to various methodologies, mother–young relationships were considered as similar to those reported after natural calving. In our study, cows can be considered as better mothers than heifers.



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Keywords

Cattle; Caesarean; Mother–young relationships; Parity

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