



Mill Creek Veterinary Services

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Problem Identified: Umbilical Hernias in heifer calves.

Cause: Umbilical infection after birth that leads to swelling, abscesses, and scar tissue. Also, there may be a small genetic relationship. If the dam has a hernia the calf is 2-5 times more likely to also have a hernia. However, in my experience, most of the hernias I correct show evidence of umbilical infections.

Prevention: Multiple dipping of the navels after birth with 7% iodine will prevent most umbilical infections. It needs to be 7% iodine because it kills bacteria and more importantly, dries out the navel to prevent spread up into the navel. Then you need multiple dippings at your high contamination points. Dip the navel right after birth, again when the calf is loaded onto the truck for transport to the calf ranch, and again when the animal is unloaded from the calf ranch into a hutch. The navel needs to be thoroughly dipped so that the iodine runs off. Dips work better than sprays. Sprayers allow sections of the navel to be missed when dipped.

Procedure: Abdominal surgery is my recommendation for animals about 4-6 months old. As with any surgery there is risk. The animal is taken off feed the day prior to surgery to reduce the incidence of aspiration and bloat. There is a chance for anesthetic reactions. But more commonly, abscesses and scar tissue internally are more problematic. Depending upon how large and location of the abscess they can usually be removed. Prognosis cannot be given until once already into the surgery. However, in my professional opinion, it is usually to your benefit to have the surgery performed. If I feel the risk is too high on a certain animal, no surgery.

What if you choose not to surgically fix the hernia? The cow will be predisposed to ripping the hernia bigger (especially once in late lactation), allowing intestine and other organs into the pocket. Intestinal torsion, blockage, intussusception, will lead to death.

Post-operative treatment: The animal needs to be on antibiotic therapy post-surgery. The incision line needs to be monitored for no breaks, or pus. Exterior sutures then need to be removed 14 days later.