

Heifer spay: A practical approach

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Introduction

I learned how to spay heifers in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The extensive practice of beef production, lack of fences, seasonality of access to cattle, and the need for non-pregnant cattle for live export made the practice of spaying heifers commonly used.

Key words: spay heifers, Australia, in practice, practical approach

Why spay heifers

Spayed heifers will grow as well as or better than intact heifers. Management of the herd is easier when the heifers are spayed; one can run them with other animals and avoid the risk of pregnancy. Interstate movement of spayed heifers is much easier than intact heifers because Brucellosis vaccination is not required for spayed animals. In my area, feedlots pay a premium for spayed heifers over intact heifers.

Why not spay heifers

Spaying heifers is a surgical procedure that requires a skill that one can only obtain by practice on many animals. Risk factors include death due to bleeding or infection. If no premium is paid or one does not have the risk of unwanted pregnancy in young heifers, one might elect not to spay heifers.

The “do” in spaying heifers

Optimal weight for the surgery is 500-600 lbs. It is advantageous to take animals off feed for 24 hours before the surgery. This will allow for less manure, less risk of contamination and less rumen fill to allow more space to work. Less rumen fill will also reduce the risk of puncturing the rumen with the spay tool. I recommend that you carry liability insurance. Always communicate the risk of surgery with producers prior to surgery. If an animal dies, it is a good idea to offer a necropsy. I often find that underlying respiratory disease was the cause of death, rather than bleeding or peritonitis. Animals purchased from a sale barn benefit from an approximately 2-week transition period to get healthy and acclimated to the new environment before one spays the heifers. I use silver bright USDA tags to identify spayed heifers. Some states offer spay tags.

The “don’t” in spaying heifers

Do not spay heifers without talking to the producer and the herd vet about the risks of the procedure. Fat and older heifers have higher risks of complications post-surgery. Once you are in the abdomen and are trying to manipulate the ovaries, it is very important to work as quickly and efficiently as possible so as to spend as little time as possible on the procedure. If one cannot spay the animal for whatever reason, it is advised to withdraw tool and call it a no-spay.

Spay techniques

I am aware of 3 techniques. Willis dropped ovary, Kimberling-Rupp and flank spay technique. The Willis and Kimberling-Rupp techniques are vaginal approaches to spaying. The Kimberling-Rupp technique utilizes a tool to extract the ovaries. I have only used the Willis dropped ovary spay technique.

With the animal secure in a squeeze chute and preferably not restrained by the head, I use a paper towel to initially wipe the vulva; others use a water hose with Nolvasan added in the water. Insert the tool into the vagina with the other hand in the rectum, lifting the rectum up to avoid tearing it, then push it through the vaginal wall at the 12 o'clock position. Once inside the abdomen, use the hand in the rectum to introduce the ovary through the slit in the tool, then pull the tool back to cut the ovary off. Repeat with the other ovary. It is very important to keep the tool on top of the uterus and not get it below the uterus or under the broad ligament. Pull the tool out through the vagina. Some ovaries will get caught in tool and come out when you withdraw the tool slowly. Most will fall to the bottom of the abdomen.

How heifer spaying fit into my practice life

Lander Vet is primarily a dairy practice. Offering heifer spaying to Lander Vet clients has allowed us to add one more service. It is somewhat seasonal, but beef producers typically don't mind doing the spaying in the afternoon, which in turn allowed us to do the morning herd checks as scheduled.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Dave Morrell of Broome Veterinary Hospital in Broome, Western Australia for teaching me everything I know about spaying heifers, as well as acknowledge all the producers who have allowed me to practice on their animals.

