

Handling Cattle for Medical Procedures: Head Restraint

Our topics for this week are:

- Rope Halters
- Nose Leads
- Nose Rings

Most handling and restraint of cattle can be and should be done WITHOUT tranquilization, sedation, hypnosis, or anesthesia. However, some handling and restraint procedures should be restricted to veterinary medical professionals due to the potential danger to the animal or handler. These require special skills, equipment, or facilities, and possibly adjunct chemical restraint or complete immobilization by chemical restraint.

Restraint of the head of cattle eliminates most of their struggling. Any other restraint that does not restrain the head well will result in continued struggling. Methods of head restraint include the use of halters, nose leads, and nose rings.

Rope Halters

Use of a halter is the safest method to restrain a cow's head because a cow or bull may go down and be injured if it is tied only by a nose lead, nose ring, or neck rope. However, putting a halter on a cow, especially when it is in a stanchion can be hazardous for handlers. The most commonly used halter is a rope halter that extends into a lead.

Rope halters for ruminants are made with twisted rope and created with splicing techniques. Care must be taken not to place the nose piece portion of the halter lower than the bony part of the nose or the nostrils may be pinched shut causing the animal to panic. A cattle rope halter extends into its own lead rope and exits the halter on either the right or left side of the animal's cheek, i.e., it is reversible. When leading a cow, it should be on the cow's left side. If a cow is caught in a stanchion, it should be on the same side of the face that the lead rope will be tied to the chute's cleats. To put a cattle halter on properly, remember: "the part that draws goes under the jaws."

Rope halters are used to lead halter-broke cows, calves, and steers. They may be applied while a cow or calf is in a stall, a stanchion, or when restrained by a neck rope and snubbing post. The adjustable portion and lead rope portion should be on the left side of the cow's head. With practice the halter can be held at the crownpiece with the right hand and placed on the cow's head with a backhand movement of the right hand while standing to the left of the cow. The crownpiece goes over the right ear and then the left. The muzzle part should be open enough to fall under the cow's jaw. The halter is then tightened and adjusted into place. This method does not require a handler to be pressed against the cow to place a halter or risk injury to the handler's hip.

Some handlers prefer to use two hands and catch the muzzle first and then place the top part over of the ears. Attempting to place or adjust a halter with both hands requires pushing the handler's hip next to the cow's head. If the cow struggles in avoidance, being next to them results in being pushed away. If the handler's hip is not pressed against the cow, a swing of the

cow's head may fracture the handler's hip. Furthermore, two handed haltering can result in bending close enough to a cow's head that a butting injury to the handler's head is possible.

Nose Leads

A nose lead is a blunted clamp (also called "tong") that are best placed in nostrils with a sweeping motion from the side while cow is in a stanchion and the handler faces it at a safe distance. Functional nose leads should have smooth blunted ends on the tongs, a 1/8 inch gap between closed tongs, and a smooth rope lead. Chains on nose leads are undesirable since they can kink, pinch, and pull open. Nose leads should only be used if the neck is restrained in some form of stanchion, including a headgate of a squeeze chute. Use of nose leads to restrain the head is more likely to make the animal more resistant to future handling than will the use of rope halters. Therefore, nose leads should not be used for procedures that have to be frequently repeated.

Halters are generally preferable to nose leads. However, nose leads are less dangerous for handlers to apply, if done correctly. They allow the cow's head to be pulled to either side without being removed and reversed (flipped) as necessary with a halter. A nose lead also allows the cow's head to be pulled further to the sides or upward, which can facilitate jugular venipuncture in some cows. Nose leads risk injuring the nasal septum in cattle, but this is very rare if the balls of the leads do not touch when the leads are closed and the lead rope is always kept tight so the cow does not sling its head. Cattle restrained by a nose lead should not be tied firmly to a chute cleat in case they go down and could hang by their nose and possibly tear their nasal septum.

When applying nose leads to a cow, the handler must take care not to lean over the cow's head or be within forward striking distance of the cow's head if it should lunge forward in the headgate. The handler should not approach cow from a straight-on direction with the nose lead as this will intensify its efforts to dodge placement of the lead. Nose leads are applied by holding the lead with one hand with the palm up. The handler stands in front of the cow's head while the cow's head is restrained in a head catch or stanchion. The tongs are separated and held open using the ring and little finger. A sweeping movement is used from the handler's right to left if the tongs are held with the right hand. The right tong goes in the cow's left nostril, the left tong immediately follows into the right nostril, and tongs are quickly closed by a tug on the lead rope. Chain attachments to nose leads do not slide smoothly or reliably without kinking and should not be used with this method.

A less safe method is for the handler to press his hip against the cow's head, putting a hand on the other side of the jaw, and putting the tongs in while trying to partially immobilize its head. Nose leads should not be applied for more than 20 minutes.

For brief restraint, a handler can grasp a cow's nasal septum with his thumb and middle finger and use his fingers in the same manner as metal nose tongs.

Nose Rings

Nose rings are used in all adult dairy bulls and some beef bulls. Most have a nose ring placed between 1 to 2 years of age, before they become territorially aggressive. The safest means of moving a bull with a nose ring is with two handlers, one on each side with a bull staff. A bull staff is a pole that has a hook or snap on one end that attaches to the nose ring. A bull staff is usually used in combination with a halter to lead a bull.

Placement of nose rings should be done by a veterinarian since the use of local anesthesia and post-surgical pain relievers are needed. A chute with a headgate and nose bar should be used for nose ring placement.

People should never play with a bull calf since this can eliminate the natural respect most have for human personal space. A bull calf should be culled if it shows signs of dominance aggression, such as head shaking, staring at people within the bull's enclosure, pawing the ground while facing a person, or deliberately showing his side to a person.

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Rope halters for cattle extend into a lead rope on the right or left side and are reversible.**
- 2. Nose leads can be applied more quickly than halters and allow tying to either right or left without being taken off for reversal as is needed with a rope halter.**
- 3. Smooth rope leads on nose leads can be applied much easier than chain leads on nose leads.**
- 4. Most bulls should have nose rings applied between 1 and 2 years of age.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.