

# UTILISING PAIN RELIEF DURING THE CALVING SEASON

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**A**s the calving season is well and truly underway, the use of both local anaesthetic and pain relief (via a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, NSAID) is considered the gold standard when disbudding and castrating calves to minimise the effects of these painful procedures for good welfare. These are available under prescription from your veterinary practitioner.

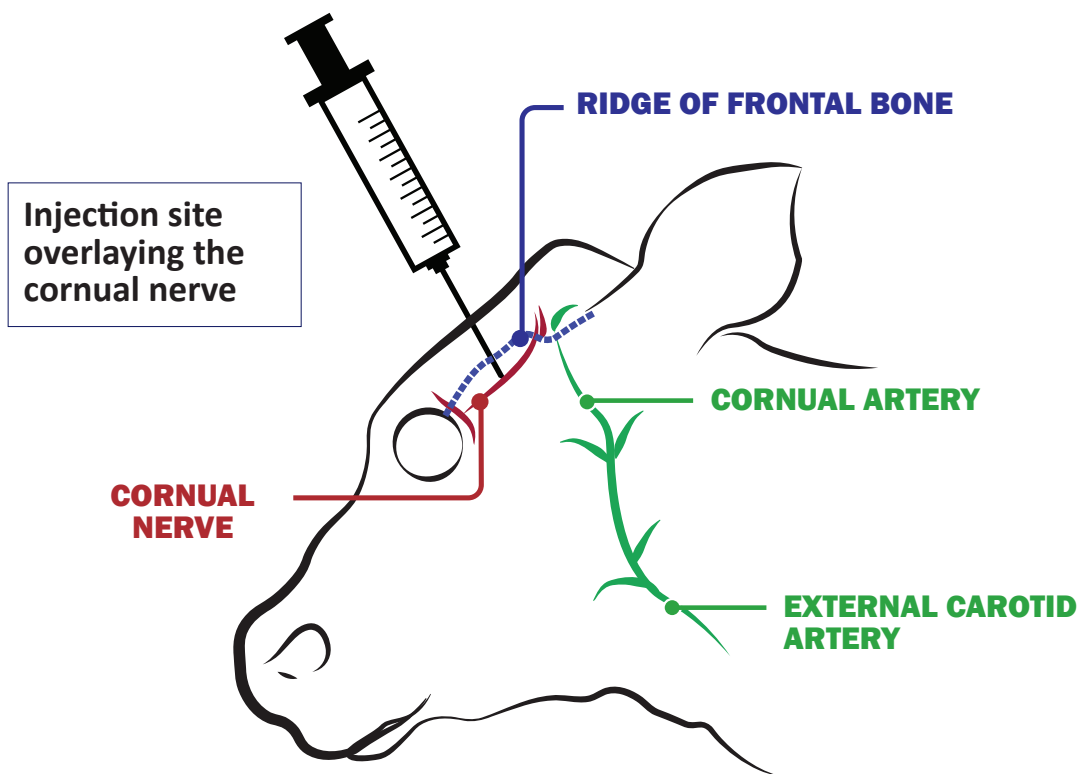
It is best to perform these procedures as young as possible on healthy animals. They should not be performed on sick calves or when other stressful events are taking place such as weaning, mixing or transport. Animals in stress or pain will not thrive and will be more susceptible to infectious disease. Do not attempt these procedures without being shown proper technique or unless you are confident that you will safely and efficiently carry them out. If in doubt, contact your vet for advice.



## Disbudding

Disbudding should be done after the horn buds become visible, as the timing can differ depending on the breed, but not left too late (i.e. once the horn buds are attached to the underlying bone). The calf's head should be completely restrained to prevent injury and a calf dehorning crate will minimise stress to the calf and ensure optimum safety to the operator. Remember to monitor calves for 10 days after the procedure for signs of infection or flystrike to ensure early treatment.

Cauterisation is only permitted up to 4 weeks of age and is the only legal method for disbudding in Ireland. Local anaesthetic is mandatory for disbudding after two weeks of age but is recommended along with pain relief for all ages. Disbudding in young calves is less painful and stressful than dehorning of older animals. Dehorning refers to the removal of the horn at any time after attachment of the horn bud to the skull, which occurs at approximately 2 months of age. Dehorning must be carried out under veterinary supervision.



The image indicates the injection site for local anaesthetic when disbudding. The best location to anaesthetise the nerve is halfway between the base of the ear and the corner of the eye. Feel for a bony ridge in this area; the nerve runs under that ridge.

## Castration

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Castrated males tend to be less aggressive, safer and easier to handle. Delaying castration offers no economic benefit to the farmer but results in much greater pain and risk to the health and welfare of the animal. Calves can be castrated with a Burdizzo under six months of age or with a rubber ring before 8 days of age. Outside of these, castration must be done by a veterinary practitioner. Calves should be adequately restrained before castration to prevent injury to yourself or the calf. Pain relief is highly recommended for any age for the welfare of the animal. If castrating using a rubber band, the wound should be monitored for signs of infection or flystrike. If using a Burdizzo, each spermatic cord is crushed twice (second crush below the first) for 10 seconds each along the neck of the scrotum. Do not castrate an animal with one testicle (cryptorchid), consult with your veterinary practitioner. Tetanus vaccinations are recommended to minimise the risk the disease.

## Other uses for NSAIDs during the calving season

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Analgesia is under-used around calving, particularly for treatment of calves. The routine use of NSAIDs is also recommended as part of the initial treatment in calves with diarrhoea that are systemically ill. The beneficial effect of NSAIDs at this time could be caused by their analgesic, anti-inflammatory, antipyretic, or antisecretory properties, or due to underdetermined effects on intestinal motility. It is currently not clear which of these potential effects is the most important. Studies show that calves receiving a single NSAID injection at the onset of diarrhoea, had improved appetite and performance compared with placebo treated calves.

There is increasing evidence that calving is painful for both cow and calf. Available data strongly suggests that a NSAID pain-relief leads to improved welfare of both cows and calves in the postpartum period. Postpartum treatment of cows with NSAIDs has the potential to result in productivity gains. There is limited evidence of adverse effects and appears to be NSAID specific. Administering NSAIDs at calving is recommended for veterinary practitioners and farmers seeking to optimise the care of parturient cattle and newborn calves. As such, they could be expected to have significant effects in cows that have experienced a difficult calving or are downer cows.