

CALVING EASE

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Money Saving Tips for Calf Raising

Money is in short supply on most farms. So we'd all like "more for less!" Is it really possible to get more for less when raising calves? We think the answer is yes. Here are three of our tips.

Tip #1: Feed Good Colostrum Right Away : The first tip is straightforward: increase the calf's antibodies by feeding good colostrum right away. Antibodies are good; they go a long way toward producing a healthy calf. Antibodies come from the dam's colostrum. Pathogens (bacteria, viruses, parasites - "bugs") are everywhere! "Bugs" are bad; they lead to sickness and even death. It's a race. Antibodies have to be absorbed by the calf first or the "bugs" take over. Survival, especially during a calf's first two weeks of life, depends heavily on us helping the calf win in this race. So, get antibody-rich colostrum into the calf as soon as possible after birth!

Why the hurry? As little as 30 minutes after birth, antibody absorption rates have been observed to have declined. Researchers estimate that antibody absorption rates in the first hours after a calf's birth may drop as much as five percent per half-hour. Consider then, for example, a calf that isn't fed colostrum until 3 hours after she's born. She may have lost as much as 30% of her ability to absorb the antibodies available to her in the colostrum when she finally does get it. By then the "bugs" already have a head start.

Organizing and planning for early colostrum feeding is difficult for everyone. Someone has to look in on the dam to see if she has calved. Colostrum often needs to be heated (or thawed and then heated). The calf needs to be fed. These things all take time and none of us have enough of it. But what are the costs of not feeding colostrum promptly? Possible answers: Extra labor to care for sick calves. Expenses for electrolytes. And medication. Dead calves.

The labor invested in prompt feeding of colostrum to newborn calves pays big dividends on a dairy farm. Antibodies in a newborn calf's blood are dollars saved!

Tip #2: Controlling Pathogens: We've already said that survival can be seen as a race to get antibodies into the calf's system before the "bugs" get there. The second tip, then, is simple: cut exposure to the "bugs." If the calves are born in individual calving pens, clean the pens often and spread straw as if it was free. If calves are born on a large bedded pack, bed frequently and spread bedding as if it was free. Fresh bedding reduces exposure even before the dam has a chance to lick off the calf.

Exposure can be reduced some more by moving the calves off the calving area as soon as possible after they have been licked off. Why do so many calves born between 10 PM and 6 AM get sick? In our opinion these heifer calves suffer not only from delayed colostrum feeding but also from exceptionally high exposure to bacteria, viruses and parasites. Bedding drenched with calving fluids may appear "clean" but is, in fact, crawling with "bugs" too small to see. Of course, prompt navel dipping with tincture of iodine (navel dip) helps too. Remember though, the calf's mouth is also a great doorway for any "bugs" on the bedding or the dam.

The labor invested in timely removal of calves to a clean pen or hutch pays big dividends on a dairy farm. Pathogens we keep from the calf are dollars saved!

Tip #3: Add More Antibodies by Feeding Transition Milk: This tip refers to the milk from the second and third milkings after the cow has calved - transition milk. Transition milk still has about one-third the antibody content of colostrum (the first milk for the cow after she calves). And, it has one-half again the nutrients per quart compared to whole milk. If this milk is saved separately from other waste milk, it can be fed to calves that have finished their colostrum feedings. (See also Calving Ease, September, 1997, "Feeding Fermented Transition Milk.") Depending on the supply, some calf raisers feed transition milk steadily up through seven to fourteen days of age.

The antibodies from the transition milk won't be absorbed into the calf's blood. But, they can help in the battle against the huge numbers of pathogens that enter the calf's digestive system. Transition milk may even immobilize "bugs" in the calf's gut before they get a chance to attach to the gut lining.

Is transition milk an overlooked resource on your farm? Not all farms can organize to collect and save this milk. But, if you can manage it, feeding transition milk to young calves represents dollars saved - dollars not spent on labor to treat sick calves, on electrolytes, or on medication.

Calf Raisers' Tips

Many of us use a sticky grain starter for our young calves. In cold weather this starter gets stiff and is hard to loosen in a grain pail. Norman Troyer from Gardeau Crest Farms uses a small garden claw to stir up cold, sticky starter. (If you don't know what kind of tool we're talking about, go to your nearest garden center and ask to see one.) Norm says it saves his hands and wrists as well as keeping the grain from packing down so the calves can get at it better.

Several calf raisers have shared ways to reduce cold and cracked hands and fingers during the winter. Wear thin, water-proof gloves (nitrile or latex) under your work gloves. If you have to remove your outer-most gloves to work with a calf (say to tube or medicate her) your hands are still protected. Reducing direct exposure to water and the frigid air also seems to reduce the amount of cracking, especially at the fingernails. Some calf raisers go one step further and apply Bag Balm or Vaseline to their hands (a nice conditioner) before putting on their gloves. They say they have fewer cracks (and therefore less pain), smoother skin and healthier hands.

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