

CALVING EASE

July 2000

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Beginning to Eat Starter Grain

Starter grain is food. Now, starter grain isn't part of a newborn calf's world. Grain has to be discovered, explored, tasted and finally accepted as food. Every calf raiser would like this to be both early in life and uniform among calves.

When does it happen?

Every person with calf raising experience has a story to tell about the calf that began eating starter grain right after she nursed her colostrum from her dam. Let's set the exceptions aside for a moment. What can we expect as a "normal" beginning age for grain eating?

In general, research tells us that our milk replacer feeding practices will help determine this "normal" age at which consistent starter grain begins. The greater the amount of milk replacer fed the later the beginning age for eating grain. In a feeding trial completed at Noblehurst in 1999 we found the same thing. Three groups of calves were fed either 20, 30 or 46 ounces of milk replacer powder daily. Their records were searched for the first seven day period when they consistently ate more than 1/4 pound of starter grain daily. Let's call the first day of this week the "begin-to-eat-grain" date. The averages of this day at which these three groups of calves began to eat grain consistently are 17, 22 and 29 days respectively.

But, let's look at these records a different way. While the average "begin-to-eat-grain" age for the 20 ounce of milk replacer (m.r.) is 17, two-thirds of the calves started to eat grain between 13 and 21 days. That may be a better way to describe "normal" calf behavior. Similar ages for the 30 ounce m.r. group are 11 to 33 days. The range for the 46 ounce group is from 17 to 41 days. Notice that the lower boundaries (13, 11 and 17 days) are quite close to two-weeks old. We may call that "normal behavior."

In all three groups the average amount of grain eaten the first seven days of consistent consumption was three pounds. The pattern was very similar regardless of the "begin-to-eat" age. Up to that age the behavior was pretty much just pushing the grain around either out of curiosity or looking for milk. Then, bam! "This is food!" In all three groups two-thirds of the calves ate between 2 and 5 pounds of starter grain in the seven days after consistent eating began. Remember, however, these calves all had free-choice water from the first day in the hutch.

Summary

First, increasing the milk replacer feeding rate from 20 to 30 to 46 ounces a day changed the average

“grain-start-day” from 17 to 22 to 29 days of age respectively. Second, there was wide variation among the calves in all three groups. Many of the calves receiving the highest level of milk replacer began eating grain at less than 21 days. In contrast, more than a few of the calves receiving the lowest level of milk replacer waited until more than 21 days to begin eating grain. While the general rule “more milk replacer = less starter grain” is true, there are many, many exceptions. Conclusion? For most effective management, try to figure out some way to monitor starter grain consumption individually in order to spot either sick calves that are off-feed or heifers needing individual attention.

Other Issues

As Pam and Sam have talked recently it's clear we both place a lot of emphasis on grain-pail management. We prefer to start out every calf with clean pail free of dirt and musty odors. Everyone is aware of the need to dump out dirty grain when calves poop in the pail. We both check pails daily for wet or spoiled grain. The musty odor of this grain discourages calves from eating.

Feeding starter grain in amounts just over the individual calf's appetite is ideal. Enough grain is fed daily to allow just a small amount left over. That tends to keep fresh grain in front of the calf every day. The ideal practice is to provide 100 percent fresh grain daily for all calves. In practice, Sam recommends replacing all the grain every other day for the calves not yet consistently eating grain. Older calves have to live with once or twice a week pail cleaning. What makes this especially hard to manage is a weekend helper that feeds large amounts of grain to small eaters. This leads to stale starter and often moldy grain at the bottom of the pail. What is there to do but dump it out and start over with the proper amount of grain?

Small calves need to be able to reach their grain pails. Pail racks may need to be lowered temporarily for them to reach in without choking. Or, for the first two or three weeks extra pails can be tied to the pen or hutch. Pam puts a plastic cover upside down in these pails so the calves can more easily reach the grain and she can just use a small amount of fresh grain daily.

A number of calf raisers have told me of their feeding time practice of dropping a little starter grain in the milk pails as the calves finish drinking. This does involve extra labor. However, they feel this practice pays for itself. They are convinced that their calves recognize starter grain as food sooner than if they were left alone to search for the grain pail. Earlier grain consumption means earlier weaning. Earlier weaning means less labor overall.

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