

CALVING EASE

September 2001

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Habits: Good and Bad

If your life is anything like Sam's and Pam's be grateful for habits. If we had to think through every little thing we do each day not much would get done. Think of simple tasks such as brushing your teeth or making out a check. A habit carries from beginning to end of the simple job. Our teeth get brushed. Our check gets written.

Good Habits of Calf Raisers

Most of us start out learning a job one step at a time. If we have good instruction we learn the correct way to complete each step. By putting the steps together properly the job is done the right way. This is how good habits are started.

All we have to do to establish a good habit is to repeat the steps properly until they become nearly automatic. For example, we have learned the steps to apply tincture of iodine (navel dip) to a newborn calf's umbilical cord. We know the navel dip's location, we know where to squirt/spray the dip and we know when enough dip has been applied in the correct place. When we supervise a birth we just automatically reach for the navel dip and apply it correctly. That's a good habit.

Other examples? When we see a cow having a calf we go to our colostrum storage place and start heating colostrum – a good habit. When cleaning up feeding equipment we use the proper chemicals and proper wash water temperature – a good habit.

Bad Habits of Calf Raisers

Most of us start out with good habits. Somehow we drift away from them. Our good habits often turn into bad habits. Frequently this drift is due to cutting corners. We try to get a job done in a little less time. For example, rather than changing the starter grain in the very young calves' pails daily we start changing it less often until we are doing this only once a week. A bad habit takes over.

Sometimes as we were learning we were never convinced that some of the steps in the job were really necessary. A step or two could be dropped without changing the end result. For example, as long as we are going to wash milk-feeding equipment why should I bother to rinse it first? Perhaps we were never told how the residual milk destroys the ability of the chlorine in the wash water to kill bacteria. So, we drop that step. A bad habit takes over.

Frequently our supplies of a product run out or piece of equipment breaks. So, it's easier to just do without it rather than pester someone else on the farm to get more or to replace it. For example, the sanitary stainless steel whisk used to mix milk replacer is run over by a truck. So, we just use a piece of wooden broom handle to do the job (contaminating every batch of milk replacer with oodles of bacteria). A bad habit takes over.

Protecting Ourselves from Bad Habits

The procedure is called monitoring. A person is assigned the responsibility of observing the performance of a specific job. Standards are agreed on to establish the correct completion of each step. When performance and standards don't match then action can be taken to rid of the bad habit and reinforce the good habit.

Let's use thawing frozen colostrum as an example. The steps are (1) remove the container from the freezer; (2) fill a pail with hot water (not over 150°); (3) put the colostrum container in the pail; and (4) remove the container when the contents have melted and warmed to feeding temperature.

Now, what can go wrong? The pail normally used for this job is gone; we have to use a pail that's too small. This extends the thawing period too long delaying feeding time. The thermometer used to check water temperature was borrowed and not returned; we have to guess at temperature. The too hot water "cooks" the antibodies reducing the immunity level in the calf. The person does not return to remove the container when warmed. This allows the bacteria in the colostrum to multiply many times giving the calf scours three or four days later. These are definitely "bad" habits.

A person assigned to monitor colostrum thawing checks to see that the pail and thermometer are where they belong. Once a week or so they check the thawing temperature being used for this job. When convenient they observe the duration of the thawing/warming step. They regularly sample colostrum just prior to feeding for laboratory testing for bacteria. This monitoring reinforces "good" habits and detects drift into "bad" habits.

CALF FEEDER'S TIP

Ask your milk truck driver or veterinarian if they know of a place where you can check a milk sample for bacteria. When you find a laboratory, sample both colostrum and milk replacer as fed. Fill a milk sample bottle (like the ones that the truck driver uses) to the line. Label it and toss it into the freezer. When you have completed your sampling give the frozen samples to either your milk truck driver or veterinarian for lab delivery. Ask to have analysis done to determine both the quantity and species of bacteria. We suggest this sampling be done at least twice a year if results consistently come back showing minimal bacterial growth. If the samples contain bacteria too numerous to count (labs often report this as TNTC) after each improvement is made to reduce contamination new samples need to be collected and analyzed. This monitoring will reinforce good habits. It will also spot bad habits before too many calves get sick or die.

If you know of someone that doesn't currently receive **Calving Ease** but would like to, tell them to **WRITE** to **Calving Ease**, 11047 River Road, Pavilion, NY 14525 or to **CALL** either 716-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or 716-343-8128 (Offhaus Farms Office) or **FAX** (716-591-2898) or **e-mail** sleadley@servtech.com. A limited number of back issues may be accessed on the Internet at www.calfnotes.com and clicking on the link, Calving Ease. PLEASE NOTE THE NEW WEB SITE ADDRESS FOR CALF NOTES.