

Give calves an extra edge at the starting line

When you're raising replacement heifers, your goal is to build animals that will achieve long, healthy, productive lives. The care and nutrition they receive in their first days and weeks of life can have lasting effects on how well they fare in the longer race.

Colostrum before all else

Even the most elaborate nutrition plans and well-designed facilities may have little value if calves do not receive adequate colostrum immediately after birth. The immunological and nutritive benefits of colostrum cannot be replicated later in life.

The biggest colostrum challenge is getting it into the calf quickly and cleanly. If delivering 4 quarts of clean colostrum (3 quarts for Jerseys) within 4 hours of birth cannot be achieved, then colostrum replacers are a viable alternative. Although this may appear to be an expensive option from a cash-flow standpoint, it may be the best choice for long-term calf benefit when quick and clean are in doubt.

Remember that sanitation is critical at all of the touchpoints between the cow and the calf during colostrum transfer – the calving pen, cow's udder, milking equipment, transfer pails, feeding equipment and human handler's hands and clothing.

And a colostrum tip: once you start feeding colostrum, finish the job. If a calf does not finish suckling a bottle, deliver the rest of the feeding via an esophageal tube feeder. Don't come back hours later to see if the calf will nurse.

Dial in on feeding practices

Consistency is key for feeding young calves for optimal growth and health. Feed the same time for every feeding, every day. And make sure the temperature of milk or milk replacer is the same every feeding, winter or summer. Using a thermometer is essential.

When feeding milk replacer, weigh powder and water to ensure consistent rations. If feeding whole milk, estimate your solids with a refractometer. An estimate is better than not knowing. Adjust solids with the addition of water and a high-protein powder so the protein and fat are close to the same every feeding and the total solids are as exact as can be.

Offer water the same time every feeding shortly after the milk feeding before the calves lie down after drinking milk, especially in the winter. Make sure the water is clean, fresh and not contaminated with milk from previous use of the buckets.

Good starter consumption later in life starts in the first few days of life. Get the rumen started in its development early so it is more functional early and at weaning. Follow the time-honored methods to get calves to eat starter and don't change products after calves start eating it. Calves housed alone take longer to adapt to change than calves housed as pairs or groups. Take advantage of this behavior if you can.

Successful sanitation

Dairy farmers are experts at cleaning milk-handling equipment, largely because they are evaluated every day on the bacteria levels in the milk they sell. Apply that same knowledge and vigilance to calf-feeding equipment. Calves deserve that advantage as well.

Work with your veterinarian, nutritionist or sanitation supplier to develop cleaning protocols for calf-feeding equipment. Keep it simple, effective and consistent.

Biofilm is made up of water-repellent, densely packed communities of bacteria cells, sometimes pathogenic, that can grow on any surface on which moisture is present. They only can be broken up with physical scrubbing and turbulence. Stay ahead of biofilms on calf equipment by using a brush on bottles, tubes and nipples every day.

To minimize biofilm build-up, dry and sanitize equipment every day. Don't expect equipment to dry easily or quickly on its own, especially in damp rooms with marginal air flow. Use a clean, dry towel to accelerate the drying process, just as you would do with your own cups and dishes.

Expect your advisors to regularly measure your sanitation effectiveness via Adenosine Triphosphate (ATP) swabbing. ATP is present in all living cells; monitoring it will provide feedback on how well you are staying ahead of biofilm and other contaminants.

Help calves breathe easy

Calves that have lung damage early in life will very likely become early culls later in life. Creating good air quality and protecting the lung should be your primary housing concern, regardless of housing type.

For young calves in group housings, ventilation is several-fold more important compared to individual pens or hutches. Group housing usually calls for greater attention to bedding upkeep, which also influences air quality. Monitor air quality with inexpensive ammonia test strips.

Much has been learned recently about ventilating calf facilities to promote good air exchange without creating a draft. Take advantage of that technology to provide a high-quality breathing space for your calves.

And, as always, clean, dry and comfortable are the edicts that should dictate calf-environment management. The same sanitation efforts applied to feeding equipment – including periodic ATP swabbing – can and should be applied to the environment in which calves live.

When these fundamentals in calf care are covered, it is amazing how calves can grow and thrive. Ultimately, such proactive management makes the jobs of calf raisers easier – and helps calves finish strong later in life.

Original article published in Progressive Dairyman