



Calving checklist

Ciarán Lenehan goes through some useful and indeed essential items on suckler farms this calving season

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Scour vaccine | When indoors, the calf's environment is more concentrated with illness-causing bugs. Many farmers say they get scour problems with calves towards the end of calving. This is due to a build-up of bugs throughout the season causing a high burden in later calves. Scour vaccine can be given no less than 21 days pre-calving. Some farmers choose to only vaccinate the later calvers as a cost-saving measure, but we are taking a small risk doing so. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Pre-calver mineral and vitamin supplement | The nuts and bolts in the engine that is our cow. Preventing hard calving, avoiding metabolic disease, calf development, ensuring calf vigour, subsequent cow fertility are all heavily influenced by mineral and vitamin status. Supplements should be introduced six to eight weeks before calving and we have had extensive coverage on optimal pre-calver supplementation at the back of the <i>Irish Farmers Journal</i> in recent weeks. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Soya bean meal | In recent years, some suckler farmers have started to supplement their cows with 300-500g of soya bean meal in the weeks prior to calving. Soya is almost 50% crude protein and the protein it contains is of exceptional quality. Its inclusion in the diet helps with colostrum quality. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Straw | A crucial item on our list and one that could be an issue this season. The straw you require this season will depend on your setup and ability to get cows and calves out. Those with creep areas will need less straw than those forced to keep cows and calves together. The more frequently you can completely clean out your calving pens during the season, the better. Lime the pen in between straw beds. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Calving gate | If you don't have a calving gate yet, get one. There is no argument here. If you do, check its functionality. Ensure the head gate is working - the springs on these can wear. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Calving jack | Clean your calving jack, oil the crank up and make sure it works. Many will keep a spare jack shaft in case the crank mechanism breaks. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Calving ropes | Clean your calving ropes, keep them somewhere clean and importantly, have a spare pair. The thicker the better with these. Generally the white ones that come with a calving jack are substandard. Don't skimp here. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Camera/calving monitor | For me, every farm should have such a device. When we check the cow in person, we are disturbing the calving process. Having a device like this allows us eliminate guesswork around progress. For me a 3G camera can't be beaten, giving you a direct feed to your smartphone anywhere in the world. These are more expensive than tail-mounted monitors, which many farmers swear by also. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Whiteboard | Having a whiteboard on the wall of your calving shed with a list of cows, their estimated calving dates and sires can be a big help when segregating animals. Many will also use these to record data - calving difficulty score/calf weight/calf vigour. A simple alternative is blackboard paint, which can be bought in any hardware shop. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Hot water supply | Have you got a hot water supply in your shed? If not, is it time to invest in a simple boiler? If you do, now is the time to check that it is functioning correctly. Have a supply of clean buckets ready for use too. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Calving gloves | Have an ample supply of elbow-length gloves for calving and conventional surgical gloves. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Lubricant | An obvious one for when intervention is necessary. We cannot afford to run out. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Iodine | Applying an iodine solution to our calf's navel shortly after birth will help prevent infections. Some use a dip, though others opt for a spray. Either way, concentration is important. We are looking for a 3% to 7% iodine solution, which research has identified as the optimum. Be conscious that the iodine concentration in your bought-in iodine is generally 10%. Some will use a chlorhexidine solution alternatively, which is fine. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Cold water bottle | A simple one - keep a drinking bottle with a sports cap filled with cold water handy. It can be easily squirted in the newborn calf's ears to help them wake up. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Weigh scales/tape | Every beef farmer should be weighing and the best time to start is day one. A typical livestock scales will suffice. Some hold the calf in their arms and stand on a conventional bathroom scales. Weighing tapes are cheap alternatives and prevent excessive physical exertion. When using tapes, focus on the relative differences between your own calves as opposed to the absolute weights as they won't be as accurate as the scales. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Stomach tube & teat bottle feeder | Make sure yours is clean and ready to use. Every farm should in fact have two stomach tubes, one for getting colostrum into newborns and another for feeding poorly calves - though touch wood there will be none of these. Last year a bottle feeding tube arrived on the market, which has advantages over the bag-based stomach tube in that it can be operated easily by one person. A teat bottle-feeder is also a no-brainer. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Electrolytes | Have some electrolyte sachets and a good dosing gun on standby in case you experience scour in calves. Often a vet will prescribe stronger medications but these will likely not be on farm when they're required and getting electrolytes into calves straightaway will be a massive help. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Soap and paper towel | Have an area where people can wash up before and after working with animals. Wiping an animal's rear end with paper towel before we handle her is also good practice. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Tails clipped | It's a good idea to have our females' tails clipped before or just at calving to help keep their udders clean. When she's locked in the head gate while you weigh and spray the calf's navel, consider spending a few seconds clipped her tail. |