

How calf health helps to ease your workload

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Calf management consumes a significant amount of time in the busy spring months. If calf health becomes an issue, many additional hours will be spent treating and tending to sick animals. So calf health enhances the performance of the farmer as well as the young animal.

The race
When a newborn calf hits the ground, a race begins. Bacteria in the calving environment and colostrum are in direct competition for space along the lining of the calf's stomach.

The 1-2-3 rule of colostrum management was developed to help ensure that it's colostrum which fills the absorption sites along the intestinal lining, preventing bacteria getting into the bloodstream. If bacteria win the race, the potential for calf illness increases significantly.

1-2-3 rule

- 1 Use colostrum from the first milking for the first feed.
- 2 Give colostrum within two hours of the calf's birth.
- 3 Give at least three litres.

Hygiene before start of calving
Notwithstanding that it is nigh on impossible to keep calving and calf houses completely clean during calving, we must aim to start out with clean facilities.

If it has not already been done, power-wash and disinfect all sheds for calving and calves (steam wash if there were scour issues last season).

These areas should be disinfected again a few days before the start of calving. This will help to reduce/eliminate the bacterial loading in the sheds at the start of calving and get you off to a good start.

Hygiene during the calving period
Calving and calf pens should be cleaned out, limed/disinfected and bedded regularly to keep the bacterial loading as low as possible. This helps to reduce the need to deal with sick calves on an ongoing basis which is wearing and is expensive in terms of treatment costs and reduced performance.

Use plenty of straw to create a warm environment for young calves (less than three weeks old) in particular. Keeping calves warm and dry is a vital part of keeping them healthy. They don't have the capacity to keep themselves warm and can suffer from cold stress, increasing their susceptibility to disease.

Hygiene at feeding
It is vital that feeding equipment is kept clean. It should be rinsed after every feeding and be fully washed and disinfected with hot water and detergent regularly. This will prevent milk scum accumulating.

Any scum present will act as a breeding ground for bacteria which will contaminate the fresh milk or milk replacer, essentially "feeding" harmful bacteria directly into the stomach of the calf.

Dry cow minerals
Feeding a good dry cow mineral at the right rate for six to eight weeks in advance of calving should result in normal calvings, assuming cows are in the right condition at calving.

Normal calvings should result in healthy, spritely calves that will be up and at it within a half hour of birth.

A good dry cow mineral coupled with a good plane of nutrition prior to calving should also result in good quality colostrum which is so vital for newborn calves.



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Facilities

Calves need at least 1.5m² floor space and 10m³ air space per head. Packing calves into sheds will only result in problems. If you are short of space, you will need to plan to have additional space available to cater for the number of calves you expect.

Alternatively, you will have to plan to export surplus calves at the earliest possible opportunity. Overfilling existing facilities will not end well.

Teagasc, in conjunction with Animal Health Ireland, are running a series of CalfCare events across the country focusing on calf health, welfare and housing this month. Confirm start time at your local Teagasc office.

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