

Weaning management is key to suckler calf health

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Suckler calves born this spring are now aged between six to nine months old. They don't know it yet, but a rude shock is coming – weaning. Minimising the impact of this potentially stressful event and preventing additional stress will help animals reach their growth potential.

Additional stress could include changing animals' diet (grass and milk to conserved feed with or without concentrates), changing their environment (outdoors to indoors), general transport or being at a mart.

Research at Teagasc Grange has shown that reducing the cumulative effect of multiple stressors around weaning time results in a reduced stress response in the calf.

Health

A good herd health programme will focus primarily on disease prevention. Consult your veterinary practitioner prior to weaning to discuss any diseases and associated risks specific to your farm. Internal parasites (stomach worms, hoose and fluke) and respiratory diseases are the main health concerns in weanlings.

Parasite control

You should plan your control programme for stomach worms, lungworm and fluke in consultation with your local vet.

Take into account your soil type, grazing system, stocking rates, previous history of problems, faecal testing and clinical assessment when deciding when to dose and what product to use.

Weanlings should be dosed with an anthelmintic effective against stomach worms (*Ostertagia* type II) and lungworm (*Dictyocaulus*). Lungworm (hoose) infection is a major cause of disease and clinical signs include persistent coughing and severe



John O'Hanlon and Shane Devaney.

pneumonia. A control programme should include a flukicide treatment if necessary. Liver fluke (*Fasciolosis*) is a common parasitic disease caused by *Fasciola hepatica*.

Prevent pneumonia

To ensure a healthy weaning, the aim is to minimise their exposure to disease and maximise their defences. The primary cause of pneumonia (respiratory disease) is usually a virus such as bovine herpes virus-1 (BoHV-1/infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR)), bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV), bovine parainfluenza-3 virus (BPI-3 virus), and bovine virus diarrhoea/mucosal disease virus (BVD/MD). In many cases, it is followed by secondary bacterial infections, usually caused by *Mannheimia (Pasteurella) haemolytica* and *Mycoplasma bovis*.

Outbreaks of pneumonia in weanlings are most common where the immune system is weakened. Nutrient deficiency can significantly suppress the immune system.

The result is a poor response to vaccination and calves that are unable

to fight off infections. Adequate nutrition minimises the long-term negative effects of disease and permits a more rapid recovery.

Any disease prevention programme for pneumonia will include vaccination. Viral specific vaccines are available, but their effectiveness depends on management procedures and the timing of their administration.

Depending on the disease causing agent (virus) and product, the vaccine may need to be administered prior to weaning. Also, bear in mind that some products require a booster dose. It is vital that vaccines are stored and administered as per the manufacturer's instructions.

This includes being given at the right time, at the right dose and route of administration, and following the correct interval between primary and booster vaccine (if required).

It is also very important that vaccines are not given to sick calves. Sick or stressed calves will not respond appropriately to the vaccine.

Castration should not take place within four weeks prior to or following weaning.

John O'Hanlon

One farmer putting this into practice is John O'Hanlon from Co Longford. John farms alongside his wife Stephanie and their family of three children. John operates a suckler-to-store system just outside the town. The farm consists of 33ha of grassland and 6ha of forestry. The farm, in one block, is a mixture of heavy type soil and mainly free-draining land.

"Our herd consists of 29 suckler cows with mainly Limousin cross and Simmental cross cows," says John.

"We use a Charolais stock bull on the main herd, with a focus on improving the weight and quality of weanlings each year." All sires are used to breed replacements.

Sires such as LM2014, EBY and CWI, which have low calving difficulty, are used on replacement heifers. John's farm is typical for the region in terms of scale and land type.

"Weighing as part of the BEEP-S scheme has allowed us to focus on which cows are performing best and producing the heavier calves," adds John.

"In 2021, bull weanlings achieved 1.24kg/day and the heifers achieved 1.14kg/day before meal was introduced."

Maximising weight gain on the bull weanlings is important in order to increase output on the farm. Achieving weight targets on the heifers allows them to calve at 24 months, which John has achieved in recent years.

"Calving at 24 months is also essential for maximising the lifetime performance of the weanlings being kept to be sold as stores," says John.

"Weighing cow and calf provides us with vital information in this regard."

John is very aware that from his farm sustainability perspective, he will need a herd of suckler cows that are fertile, milky and capable of producing a quality cattle that will fetch a strong price each autumn.

Around housing time, concentrate supplementation is provided to the weanlings. They are built up to 1kg/head/day over three to four weeks. Concentrates are supplemented for one month prior to weaning and they continue to get meal over the winter. This is something John had been doing consistently over a number of years prior to BEEP-S.

The weanlings are weaned from early October, with four or five cows and calves housed every week. When in the shed, a creep gate is used to break the cow-calf bond.

"I find that this system of weaning greatly reduces the stress on the calves and cows," says John. Some of the weanlings that are weaned first are prioritised at grass up until housing, which is usually in early November.

Herd health on the farm plays a key role. The calves are treated for worms in June, August, October and again when housed. All stock are treated for fluke and lice after housing.

This year, John plans to castrate all of the bull calves in good time before weaning. He vaccinates for the clostridial diseases and all newborn calves are vaccinated in the spring for IBR and RSV and PI3.

They then get a booster shot in the autumn, just a couple of weeks before housing. This is one of the actions he picked for the BEEP-S scheme. The suckler cows are also vaccinated for IBR. "Weanling health is crucially important," says John. "It means animals are less stressed and sets them up to be highly productive in the future."

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