

Timing, as well as quality and quan

Pamper pens

With spring calving just around the corner, what better time to brush up on 'calf signals' and review rearing protocols to make sure your girls – and boys – get off to the very best start. We spoke to three calf specialists to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

As far as calf rearing goes, there's room for improvement on most units and it's the small things – typically tweaks and changes that cost very little other than time – that can make the greatest difference. So says Mole Valley Farmers' calf specialist Rachel Smithyman, adding that colostrum feeding is an area where many producers could up their game.

"Producers are well aware of the importance of colostrum, but many could do with injecting a little speed into the process. Time is of the essence, both in terms of taking the colostrum from the cow and feeding it to the calf.

Producers should be aiming to milk the cow within two hours of calving, because that's when the colostrum is at its best quality with the highest concentration of immunoglobulins (IgGs). Aim to get between six and seven litres of good quality colostrum off her – provided, of course, she's tested to be Johne's free – and give between two and three litres to the calf straight away," she says "And then store the rest in the fridge to be used for the next feeding."

Minimise stress

She admits that this is not always easy in practice, particularly if the cow calves at 2am. "But if the first thing to enter the calf is anything other than colostrum, calf health has been compromised from the word go."

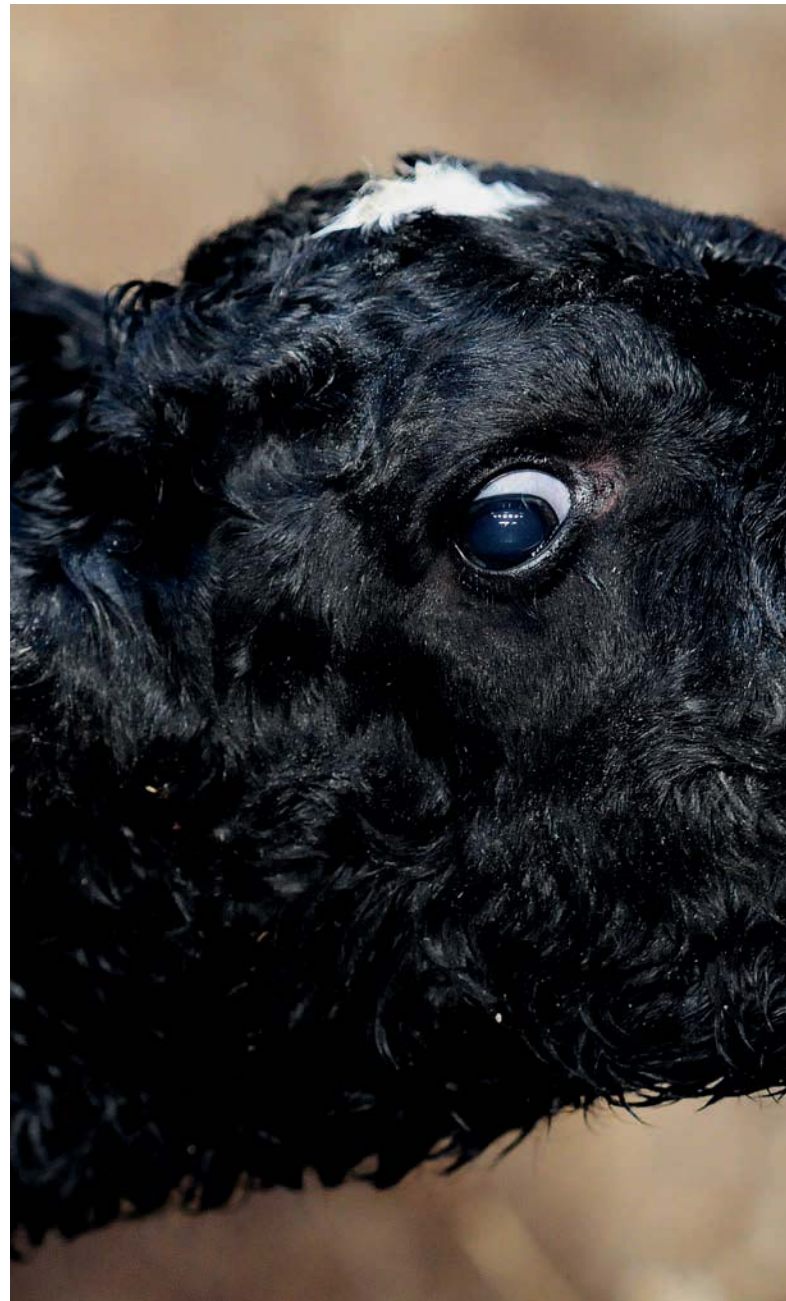
The solution here is what she calls a 'pamper pen' or a 'cuddle box' – a calving area design that gives easy access to the cow so she can be milked where she is, straight after calving. The pen may have a gate that can be drawn across, which acts as a 'crush', or it could be situated next to a feed barrier with a head yoke. "Remove the calf from the pen while you milk her and put it directly in front of her so she can see it. This will minimise stress and will actually facilitate milk let down. Placing some fresh milkers' feed mix on top of the calf will

encourage her to eat at the same time as licking the calf. Getting the cow eating as soon as possible after calving is also important."

Critical window

Mrs Smithyman likes to see producers adopting this method of feeding colostrum, not least because they can be sure that the new-born calf has had adequate colostrum in those first two critical hours.

"Some producers will still just leave the calf to get on with suckling the cow for colostrum but, even if you see the calf suckling, how do you know that it's had enough? If you wait



tity, are critical to colostrum feeding and protocols

and then, maybe, top up with colostrum later on as an insurance policy, you've missed the opportunity to get the very best colostrum that the cow will produce and the chance to get it into the calf at the optimal time."

After two hours, the amount of IgGs that the calf can absorb through its gut wall are greatly reduced.

To remove the 'faff' and make sure that protocols can be easily followed, whatever time of day or night the cow calves, she urges producers to look at their calving pens and facilities.

"It's quite simple and inexpensive to set up practical and flexible facilities in an existing shed, using a few extra gates. And the extra time spent doing this – and following the

colostrum feeding protocol – will pay dividends in terms of improved calf health and vigour."

Carmarthenshire-based vet and certified CalfSignals trainer Rob Davies says that colostrum feeding is just one on a list of five 'C's' that producers should pay closer attention to, when it comes to best practice calf rearing. "But it is at the top of the list. It's the best place to start as it lays the foundations for a healthy and productive life."

Next on his check list are: 'calories', making sure they're fed enough milk to support health as well as growth; 'comfort', which means a deep, soft and dry straw bed to burying into and good ventilation; 'consistency', because feeding calves at the same times each day reduces stress; and 'cleanliness', because it really is next to godliness, as far as calf rearing is concern. "I still go onto units where milk buckets and utensils are not thoroughly washed after every feeding. They really do need to be spotless. Bugs thrive in milk and I fear that too many calves are being fed a 'soup of bacteria' simply because 'housekeeping' isn't as good as it should be."

Fresh water

Northumberland-based calf specialist Tom Spears highlights another issue, which can be easily fixed with minimal cost. "Many producers – at least 50% of those I visit – only introduce calves to water at weaning. But I like to see water – and concentrate – made available to the calf from birth," he says.

Not only does this familiarise the calf with water and concentrates from an early age, even if they don't show any interest in consuming it, but it also helps to avoid a check in growth at weaning.

So give all calves access to water, in particular, from day one. Some calves will drink as much as four litres a day by the time they're a couple of days old. While others won't drink any for three or four weeks. But it's there, if they want it."

Another tip he shares when bucket feeding milk to calves housed in individual pens with two rings for water and creep feed buckets is to place the milk bucket inside the concentrate bucket at feeding. "When the calf has finished drinking the milk and you remove the bucket, she'll then dip her head back down into the concentrate bucket looking for more milk. She may well get a mouthful of concentrate and, again, this will help her to get used to solid feed and aid weaning." |

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