

Tips from the top

Calf-rearing experts share some low- and no-cost pointers and advice to help producers improve their systems and protect and enhance calf health and growth rates.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Producers are paying more attention to rearing young stock and more are recognising the importance of following calf-rearing protocols to maximise health and optimise growth rates. But there's still more to do to bring down the UK's average age at first calving. So what are the common pitfalls still being picked up by vets and calf-rearing experts on farm?

Barnard Castle-based vet Debby Brown, who works for Dugdale Nutrition, says that she sees cryptosporidia and coccidiosis problems on many units because producers leave the calf with the cow for too long after calving. "It's what they've always done – particularly if the cow calves overnight. But it's a health hazard. The dam can be the biggest source of infection for that young calf."

She says that most producers will leave the calf with the cow for around six hours – some for as long as 48 hours. "And they think that it's how to ensure that the calf gets plenty of good quality colostrum – and that it's good for the cow. But it's too long."

Prevent infection

She urges producers, particularly those who may have an issue with scouring in their calves, to check how long calves are left with their dam. "Two hours is the absolute maximum time that cow and calf should stay together if calf health is a priority."

That way, the new-born calf's exposure to pathogens – from both the cow and the calving pen environment – is kept to a minimum. "Many producers and calf rearers have a mental block against separating cow from calf earlier – except in Johne's infected cows. But on many units this simple step can prevent coccidiosis and other infections."

Mrs Brown says that the message re the importance of

colostrum feeding – in terms of volume, quality and timing – is getting through; that calves get what they need typically in two hours.

Lambert Leonard & May's vet Bill May says that another common calf disease *Cryptosporidium* can also be avoided through good hygiene. Control here could be better on many units through more thorough and regular cleaning of calf housing – and moving calf hutches to a different site.

"Moving hutches is essential, to 'rest' the ground they're on," he says. "Simply mucking out, cleaning and disinfecting isn't enough. Resting is key as any missed oocysts will die off without a host. And it's the same for calf buildings. Muck them out, clean and disinfect, and then let them dry and 'rest' – ideally for at least a week – before restocking. A rest period can really help to tackle a cryptosporidiosis problem."

Colostrum quality

Mr May also says that, although the message re colostrum in terms of quantities and timing are hitting home, the issue of quality still needs addressing on some units. "I'd like to see less guesswork and more producers actually using a refractometer to measure colostrum quality, rather than assessing by eye. Some will still carry out a visual check – how thick the consistency is or how yellow the colostrum is – or assess quality in terms of whether it's from a cow or a heifer. But, to be sure that it's good enough quality, they should be using a refractometer. They're inexpensive – between £15 and £20 – and they're easy to use. So this is another 'good habit' that I'd like to see more producers adopt."

Red Tractor's Kate Cross says that ad-lib access to clean, fresh water is another area where producers 'could do better'. "It's a simple low- or no-cost tweak that can make a considerable difference to calf health and growth rates."

Red Tractor standards stipulate that calves should have access to ad-lib clean, mains drinking water from birth. "But our assessors often visit units where this isn't happening until the calves are two or three weeks old or, in some cases, until the calves are actually weaned. On other units, calves are just offered a little water in the bucket straight after milk feeding. There's clearly some room for improvement."

Bill May:
“Move calf hutches and ‘rest’ calf housing after cleaning and disinfecting”





'Chilly' calves: crowding against a wall can indicate that draughts are a problem in young stock housing

This 'non-compliance' may be due to producers still thinking, as they were told in the 1980s, that young calves don't need drinking water because they're drinking milk. "The advice has changed following extensive trials and experiences. Calves do need water from birth and it won't limit or reduce their milk consumption."

Others don't offer water because they think it makes the calves' bedding wet or makes the calves 'too loose'. "Again, not true. It's important to offer fresh and clean water at all times as this will actually benefit calf health and welfare. Offering fresh water at all times will also encourage the calf to take an interest in dry feed."

Westpoint Vet's Sussex-based vet Tim Potter says that he sees units where draughts are an issue for young calves. And, again, this is simple to identify and rectify. "It's all about knowing the difference between good ventilation, or fresh air, and draughts.

"Producers are aware of the importance of good ventilation, to prevent pneumonia and other diseases, but what about draughts? Fresh air is no good if it's chilling the calf."

Crouch down

Mr Potter recommends that producers, literally, get down to calf level and see what conditions are like in the pen and calf housing. "If you crouch down and you can feel a draught, so can the calves. But it's easily sorted. Open-fronted pens, for example, may



Kate Cross:

"Check that your calves have access to fresh drinking water from birth"

just need some sheeting across them. Or even a few straw bales. Lots of air movement higher up, above the calf, is what's required, to ensure good ventilation. It's a fine line, so climb in with the calves and check to see that they're cosy, but have plenty of fresh air." Ensuring that there is enough bedding is also important as this keeps the calves warm and draught free. The calf should be able to 'nest' in this. "Carry out a nesting score either by getting in there yourself or observing the calves. Her legs shouldn't be visible if the bedding is deep enough and kneel in it to check it's dry too. Damp bedding will cause issues with humidity and potential respiratory disease problems." He says that producers should never underestimate their calves: "Watch them – they will tell you if something is wrong. Follow their cues.

If they're all huddled together in a group, possibly to one side of a pen or against a wall, then they're in a draught. Ideally, if they're comfortable, they should all be spaced out across the pen." |