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Calf Note #16 – Stress at Weaning

Introduction. Many dairy producers report that calves often have a very difficult time right after weaning. Calves may slow down in growth and intake. Often they're more susceptible to infections - especially respiratory infections. As a result, calves often experience "weaning slump", and it may take several weeks for them to get out of their slump. This reduced intake and growth associated with weaning is common in dairy calves and is usually associated with weaning, the increasing reliance on dry feed intake and ruminal fermentation, and changes in housing that often accompany weaning. The key management strategy needed to reduce weaning slump is to *minimize stress*. Often, calves are weaned, moved from individual housing into group pens of 4 to 20 calves, fed a different ration, and exposed to lots of new pathogens in their new environment. This type of weaning management is a sure recipe for setting calves back for several weeks while they try to adjust to all the stresses imposed at this time.

Here are some tips to help your calves ease the transition through weaning:

- Wean your calves when they have eaten sufficient dry feed (especially calf starter) to develop their digestive systems - particularly the rumen. This point is reached when calves are eating at least 1.5 to 2.0 lb (680 to 907 grams) daily for two consecutive days.
- If you wean calves according to age (usually 6 to 8 weeks of age), keep an eye on intake, too. Remember, rumen development and a calf's ability to digest dry feed is not solely a function of age. Rumen development occurs as calves begin to consume dry feed - particularly calf starter. While most calves begin consuming starter at 1 to 2 weeks of age, some calves - those that are sick or weak - may not start eating starter for several weeks.
- Make sure there's plenty of fresh, clean water available at all times. As dry feed intake increases, calves will consume more water.
- Research at The University of Tennessee indicates little difference between abrupt weaning and reducing the amount of liquid by 50% for the last week before weaning. Other researchers suggest that gradual weaning may be less stressful. However, calves DO make a lot of noise during that last week before weaning!
- Additives in starter may help to stabilize ruminal fermentation. These include sodium bicarbonate (stabilize rumen pH, reduce lactate production), ionophores (Bovatec and Rumensin reduce the amount of butyrate in the rumen and alter VFA ratios), and yeast culture (reduce amount of lactate in the rumen) have shown to affect rumen fermentation and improve intake of starter by calves.
- Some producers use antibiotics added to the feed (AS-700, Hoffman-La Roche, Inc., Nutley, NJ) to reduce the risk of respiratory disease.

And here are a few tips related to moving calves from individual pens into groups:

- Don't move calves at the same time you wean them. Allow a week or two for the calf to adjust to the stress of weaning before introducing the stress of moving.

- Provide good ventilation to calves when they are moved into groups. Stress and poor ventilation are the major factors responsible for increased disease incidence shortly after weaning.
- Provide a coccidiostat in the starter/grower fed to calves after weaning. As calves are moved from individual housing to pens, they are often exposed to a wider array of pathogens. Coccidiosis is particularly common in calves from 4 weeks of age and later.
- Don't wean or move calves during times of weather extremes or changes unless absolutely necessary. Weather is a source of stress for calves - our goal during the weaning period is to minimize the many stresses we impose on an animal.
- Keep the number of newly weaned calves in a pen to 4 to 6. This is a large enough group for you to manage, but small enough for the calves to adapt to the new surroundings.

Weaning doesn't have to be overly stressful for dairy calves. To make the transition easier, manage your calves to minimize the number of stressors you apply to your calves at any time. Try to make changes in feeding, housing, and other management at times other than weaning.

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