

# CALVING EASE

January 1996 (Revised Jan '04)

Sam Leadley (Attica Veterinary Associates) and Pam Sojda (Offhaus Farms)

## WHEN IS A CALF SICK?

Sometimes it's easy to tell. The calf is too weak to stand. Her breathing is labored and rapid. She's surrounded by evidence of severe diarrhea.

Other times, it's not so easy. Especially when the environmental challenge is severe in January we hate to miss a sick animal when on our routine calfcare rounds. We talked about these less obvious symptoms of a "sick" calf. We'll share them with you. Maybe you will want to add your own favorites, too.

First, any behavior that is out of the ordinary. Most calves either run to the front of their pen or come running out of their hutches at feeding time. A few are more restrained; they just peek their nose out. It's important to know what to expect from each one even if you have a hundred or more at each feeding. It's that "not normal" behavior that's the first tip off of illness.

Second, being off feed. Preweaned calves that don't drink at all, drink only part of their milk or take much longer than usual to drink. All of these, if not a normal pattern, shout out, "I'm sick!" Our experience with these preweaned calves not drinking suggests that this behavior often precedes onset of a fever by about 12 to 18 hours. It may be sort of an "early warning" signal? For weaned calves in individual pens or hutches an abrupt decrease in either water or grain intake has the same signals for us - "I'm sick."

Third, we feed grain on a separate trip through the hutches after milk has been fed. During this time we watch for calves that might be less lively than expected. This post-milk-feeding time often is one of considerable activity - a time of high spirits, jumping, hopping. The calf that's lying down and not making a nuisance of herself is suspect. Normal behavior is to stuff one's nose into the grain bucket just as the feeder tries to add grain. Or, if possible, chew on the calf feeder's hand, arm, any accessible body parts. A calf that's too quiet warrants a second look. Excess mucousal discharge from the nose? How's her breathing? Shallow, rapid? Better take her temperature.

A final observation but one that is pretty subjective. How do her eyes look? Some of us claim we can see the difference between "bright" and "dull" eyes. Now, we're not

talking here about dehydrated calves with eyes sunken back into their head. These are not calves with severe scours. These are so-called normal calves but they just don't look "right." We say to anyone who will listen, "See, she's just not right. Look at her eyes. See how dull they are? She's sick!" Our observation is that this dullness often goes along with subclinical problems such as a low level of diarrhea from a cryptosporidia infection or a mild case of pneumonia that might be a *Pasteurella hemolytica* infection.

What to do when we see these less than definite symptoms? Don't do something, just stand there. Part of the time, doing nothing may be the best solution. Probably there is a pattern to these behaviors in your situation. This pattern will suggest if doing nothing will work. It's a great solution when it works - it's cheap, takes no labor.

On the other hand, intervention may be needed. If these kinds of symptoms persist for more than one day and involve more than just a calf or two, maybe it's time to get professional assistance from your vet. Once the pattern is established and a diagnosis made, you can apply similar treatments to the sick calves. It takes careful, close observation to find the pattern, however. These are quite indefinite symptoms, often not accompanied by high fevers or severe scours, making definite diagnoses difficult. On our operations we feel our biggest problem is getting an early diagnosis on these cases. If we let them go the diagnosis is easy and the calf may just die. We'd rather figure out what might be wrong early on, treat for the probable cause, and avoid the severely ill calf. Tough call! But, someone has to do it, right?

#### CALF FEEDER'S TIP

Coccidiosis. Doesn't ever go away. Even when we think we have all our bases covered now and again a six to eight week old calf turns up positive. We've had a case or two this past Fall. They were calves that went off feed for a few days. They had a moderate case of pneumonia; quit eating enough grain to provide coverage with the coccidiostat. Some coccidia matured enough in those few days to be resistant to the coccidiostat when the calf resumed normal grain consumption. Recall that the coccidiostat is being fed at the prevention rather than treatment level. Grab-samples of feces examined at the lab showed moderate levels of coccidia.

Now, treat the calves. First, on the recommendation of our vet we use amprolium (e.g. Corid) to treat cases like this. Second, we follow the manufacturer's directions exactly. The recommended amount for the recommended length of time. Excessive amounts for too long periods of time of this compound may cause serious nutritional problems. We are told that's because this product acts to tie up a certain compound needed by coccidia to grow. But, the same compound is needed by the calf, too. Use just the right amount for the proper length of time.

Great. The vet said, "Just drench her with the recommended amount - follow the instructions on the back of the container." When's the last time he tried to hold a calf and pour fluid down her throat? We find the job a nuisance. We do need to get anywhere from 1.5 fluid ounces to 2.0 fluid ounces in the calf (1.0 ounces per cwt.). To make the job easier we use either a 60 ml (up to 135 lb. calf) or 80 ml (up to 180 lb. calf) syringe to administer the solution

depending on the size of the calf. By the third day of a five day treatment we find the calves are already accustomed to sucking on the syringe.

If you know of someone that doesn't currently receive Calving Ease but would like to, tell them to WRITE to Calving Ease, 11047 River Road, Pavilion, NY 14525 or to CALL either 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or 585-343-8128 (Offhaus Farms Office) or FAX (585-591-2898) or e-mail [sladley@frontiernet.net](mailto:sladley@frontiernet.net) or [pams91@2ki.net](mailto:pams91@2ki.net) . A limited number of back issues may be accessed on the Internet at [www.calfnotes.com](http://www.calfnotes.com) and clicking on the link, Calving Ease.